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Environment and Ethnicity in India 1200–1991

Sumit Guha's book draws on a wide range of sources to reconstruct the history of forest communities in India and to explore questions of identity and environment in an ancient agrarian civilisation. He commences by demonstrating that the current ideology of indigenous cultures is rooted in nineteenth-century racial anthropology, and goes on to show how apparently pristine ethnicities have changed and evolved through interaction with larger civilisations. In the process, he also shows how the environment was continually modified by human action from early historic times to the present. Such theories have been debated by scholars of South-east Asia and Africa, but this is the first well-documented study of South Asia. Guha's controversial critique is an important contribution to our understanding of society, politics and the environment in both the medieval and the contemporary world.

SUMIT GUHA is a Professor in the Environment Group of the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. His publications include *The Agrarian Economy of the Bombay Deccan 1818–1941* (1985).

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Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum

Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1991

Sumit Guha

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Glossary

Adivasi	lit. original inhabitant; commonly used as a synonym for the communities listed in a periodically revised schedule of the Constitution of India – hence termed Scheduled Tribes
Chauth	a tribute, theoretically a quarter of the tax-yield, extracted as a protection rent by either a displaced local chief or a powerful neighbour
Desh	plains; open country of Maharashtra
Deshmukh	hereditary subordinate territorial chief; head of a *pargana*
Deshpande	hereditary accountant of demarcated territory; usually that controlled by a *deshmukh*
Giras	payments in cash or kind regularly made to purchase the forbearance of some marauder
Girasia, Grassia	recipient of the above payment
Inam	tax-free grant, usually of land
Jaglia	a night-watchman
Jati	theoretically endogamous community; usually translated as caste
Kulkarni	hereditary village accountant
Mansabdar	Mughal Officer
Mehwasi, Mewasi, Muasi	refractory, turbulent – applied to a persona or locality
Pargana	a subdivision which might typically contain anything from twenty to several hundred villages
Patil	hereditary village headman
Rajput	lit. son of a king; an ethnonym with military connotations used in medieval and modern India by a large number of otherwise distinct communities
Rakhwaldar	guardian
Watan	hereditary estate, patrimony in land, office or both
Watandar	holder of a *watan*
Zamindar	literally landholder; a term applied to a wide range of gentry, extending from *pargana* officials to regional rulers.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used in the notes :

ALS — *Aitihasika Lekha Sangraha* – a collection of historical documents with valuable introductions, published by V. V. Khare between 1898 and 1924

BARD — Bombay Archives, Revenue Department

BAJD — Bombay Archives, Judicial Department

BISM — Bharata Itihasa Samshodhaka Mandala – a learned society of Pune.

BISMT — *Bharata Itihasa Samshodhaka Mandala Traimasik* – a journal brought out by the *BISM*, much of it devoted to the publication of original sources. Where the reference is solely to a document, I have omitted the editor's name in order to limit the size of footnotes, and given merely the journal issue and page.

IS — *Itihasa Sangraha* – a periodical brought out between 1908 and 1916 by D. B. Parasnis, and largely dedicated to publishing historical sources. Practically all the documents included were selected by him – citations therefore refer to the journal and issue only.

MIS — Marathyanchya Itihasanchi Sadhanen – a series of twenty-four volumes of historical sources gathered and published by V. K. Rajvade; two volumes appeared posthumously.

OIOC — Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library; BRP refers to the Bombay Revenue Proceedings here and BJP to the Bombay Judicial Proceedings.

PA — Pune Archives; Maharashtra State Archives, Pune.

SPD — *Selections from the Peshwa Daftar* – a series of 46 volumes edited for the Government of Bombay by G. S. Sardesai

SRBG — *Selections from the Records of the Government of Bombay* nearly 700 volumes published by the government between 1854 and 1930; divided into the 'Old Series' (O. S.) and 'New Series' (N. S.).

SSRPD — *Selections from the Satara Raja's and Peshwa Diaries* – a set of nine Selections made by G. C. Vad and published by various associates.

Introduction

There is little doubt that forests occupy a smaller fraction of the world today than they have done for some millennia, and people living in them form an even smaller, and ever-falling, proportion of the global population. However, as a consequence of the new environmental consciousness, academic inquiry into, and media coverage of these shrunken areas and shrinking populations has, in recent years, vastly increased in every part of the world. The historical dimensions of the issues involved are also increasingly coming to be recognised, as are its regional and local variations. These are the problems that the present book addresses. The book is not about the environment *per se*, but about the human use of the environment, and about the diverse communities that utilised it in distinct, but complementary, ways. It is also about how these communities sought to define themselves and organise their relations with others, and how they modified natural conditions in that process. The book thus deals both with the formation of ethnic hierarchies and the anthropogenesis of landscapes; hence it is also a contribution to the study of what Schendel has termed 'ethnic innovation' or ethnogenesis.[1]

While these processes may be found throughout the world, my inquiry is focused on the margins of agriculture in Central and Western India, or a region slightly larger than the contemporary Indian state of Maharashtra. Those margins were, until the present century, determined largely by physiographic boundary between the plains and the mountains. This work, then, is also a study of the peoples of the Vindhyadri, Sahyadri, Satpura and Satmala ranges over the past few centuries. Even today, most of the surviving forests of the region are found in these mountains, and so are the bulk of the Scheduled Tribes in Maharashtra. According to a stock dyad in journalistic and academic discourse on South Asia, forests = tribals.[2] This is not a dyad to which I

[1] W. van Schendel, 'The Invention of "Jummas": State Formation and Ethnicity in South-Eastern Bangladesh', *Modern Asian Studies*, 26, 1(1992), 126.

[2] So, for example, Felix Padel writes that 'The people who live in these forest areas are *adivasis*, India's "original inhabitants" or "aboriginals", tribal people who have evolved a

subscribe. Many difficulties arise from the protean nature of the category 'tribe' itself – a point made two decades ago in the devastating critique of this concept by Morton Fried, who pointed out that the numerous communities described as tribes could not be defined independently of the state systems with which they were associated. He also went on to demonstrate that attempts to classify them as primordial communities would not stand up to critical scrutiny.[3] Fried concluded that tribal communities could be far better understood as secondary formations, reactions to the formation of states.[4] Concrete examples of such processes at work exist in the form of two brilliant studies of the Chinese land frontiers and Northern Burma by Owen Lattimore and Edmund Leach respectively.

Lattimore argued persuasively that the formative period of Chinese society saw a differentiation between irrigated paddy farmers and nomad pastoralists, but it was

> only when this diverging specialization had been carried to a certain point that the marginal steppe society ceased to be marginal and committed itself definitely to the steppe. Having reached that point it was ready to take advantage of a steppe technique of horse usage in order to increase the efficiency of life within the steppe environment.

Political consolidation of the steppe peoples followed on that of the agriculturists, with the Hsiungnu domain forming after the Chin consolidation, and with this the 'two-thousand year history of the recognised Steppe Frontier had begun'.[5] Cultural, technical and military differences arose out of divergent ecological specialisation, and were then used to organise tributary relations between the two sorts of community.[6]

Something very similar was proposed by Leach for northern Burma. He suggested a model in which cultural differences were structurally significant but did not indicate that the differing groups belonged to distinct social systems. Rather, he argued, human beings not separated by major geographical barriers were likely to have relations with each other, and '[i]n so far as these relations are ordered and not wholly

way of life suited to the forest over countless generations' (*The Sacrifice of Human Being: British Rule and the Konds of Orissa* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 1). Similarly, the well-known environmental activist, Anil Agarwal, wrote in 1986 of 'groups like the tribals' having lived 'in total harmony with the forests' (*The State of India's Environment 1984–85 – The Second Citizen's Report* (Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 1986), p. 376).

3 M. H. Fried, *The Notion of Tribe* (Menlo Park CA: Cummings, 1975).

4 Ibid., ch. 12.

5 O. Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (Boston: Beacon Books, 1962), pp. 59–62.

6 See also T. J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 9, 37–56.

haphazard there is implicit in them a social structure'. The relations of Shan and Kachin were to be understood in these terms, and the contrast between Shan paddy farmers and Kachin swiddeners was 'in the first place ecological'. The movement of individuals or groups across the Shan/Kachin divide was, therefore, distinctly possible and sometimes accomplished.[7] If Leach's work has a weakness, it is that he makes the transition from one ethnicity to another altogether too easy; it is possible that this was in fact the case in Northern Burma – a region of intensive social and economic change and strife for a century before Leach's arrival. Prolonged turbulence would certainly make the definition and policing of ethnic boundaries difficult, as populations scattered and fled amid war and insurrection. Such situations would, however, have to be exceptional, or else ethnicity would lose its value as a ranking and ordering system, and become a mere fashion accessory of little political significance. Yet we know that this was (and in much of the world is), far from being the case – identities profoundly affect destinies, and are imposed and rejected, sought and shunned accordingly. Ordered inequality based on ethnicity requires mechanisms of boundary definition and enforcement, as Frederik Barth pointed out some three decades ago.

Barth suggested that ethnicity was one of the ordering principles of pre-modern societies, that it served to organise day-to-day interaction and political relations. His study of Swat (north-west Pakistan) showed how this might operate, and result in a 'caste-like' ranking of communities quite independent of Brahmanical principles of purity and pollution. It offers us therefore some idea of how relations might be organised by communities peripheral, by chance or choice, to the Brahmanical world. Nor should we forget that such communities – from Achaemenids to Turks and Afghans – were periodically to be found as rulers in the core areas of Brahmanical culture throughout its history, and long-sustained rule would have generated patterns of interethnic political and social relations that did not conform to the initially still unevolved scriptural model.

Barth proposed an 'ecological' model for Swat society, and in some measure what follows is also a model inspired by his work, more especially by his suggestion that natural conditions, including relative productivity and inaccessibility, were crucial to delimiting the zone within which a 'Pathan' life-style was viable. It could exist, he argued, in regions that were sufficiently rugged to be inaccessible to central authority, but yet not so sterile as to preclude the creation of a hierarchy

[7] E. R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Boston: Beacon Books, 1968) pp. 17, 20.

of exploitation.[8] In the twentieth century such 'no-go areas' were limited to the North-east and North-west of the Indian sub-continent but (I argue) in earlier times they existed in every part of it.

However, I should emphasise that the woodland 'niches' I speak of were utilised as bases for social, economic and political initiative: therefore the transgression of their boundaries, and the flow of personnel and resources into and out of them was a constitutive, and not an accidental process. South Asia has come to possess one of the most complex sets of interethnic relations in the world, and while my focus will be on a single boundary zone – that which ran along the margin of tillage – I hope it will also contribute to the understanding of social processes in the sub-continent as a whole.

Nor are these issues of purely historical interest. I have already mentioned the new global interest in and sympathy for endangered ethnicities.[9] In addition to the environmental concerns about endangered species and ecosystems, there is also the parallel concern for endangered cultures and 'indigenous' peoples – a concern perhaps strongest in those parts of the world (such as the Americas) where such entities have been most effectively triturated in the recent past. This retrospective affection has now extended to checking any possibility of the recurrence of such events in other continents, and constituted the category of 'indigenous peoples', who are presumed to exist in every part of the world except Europe. Funds being forthcoming, entities could not be lacking, and lists of such peoples have duly been generated, helped, of course by the poetic vagueness with which they are often defined. Ibrahima Fall, coordinator of the United Nation's International Decade of Indigenous People (1995–2004) described them as people who 'have always lived where fate set them down before other people arrived on the scene to live alongside them . . .'[10]

In India the groups categorised in the Constitution (1950) as 'Scheduled Tribes' have been classified as indigenous by international experts, quite regardless of their actual histories; while in East Asia an even more bizarre logic prevailed in the selection, with 2,900 Russians being listed among the 'indigenes' of China, while the claim of the Han to such

[8] F. Barth, 'Pathan Identity and its Maintenance', in Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (repr. Oslo: Scandinavian University Books, 1970).

[9] Sometimes endangered peoples are presented as just another endangered species; a delegate at the second conference of the Indigenous Initiative for Peace held in Paris from 13 to 17 February 1995 told a reporter: 'If you want to see a Karen in the year 2000 you'll have to go to a museum' (Sophie Boukhari in *UNESCO Sources*, issue 67, March 1995.

[10] Report by Sophie Boukhari in *UNESCO Sources*, issue 67, March 1995.

status was rejected![11] Many champions of such peoples have a distinctly limited knowledge of their past history – so, for instance, the new frontiersman Julian Burger, secretary of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, asserts that in India (and elsewhere in Asia) the colonial process 'left these people to their own devices' and it is only after decolonisation that 'their comparative independence [was] eroded at an alarming rate'.[12] Historically informed anthropologists and economists such as G. S. Ghurye and D. R. Gadgil, have long been critical of such ideas and I hope to show how their scepticism is fully supported by the historical record.[13] I also hope that the present volume will contribute to a more informed understanding of such categories as 'indigenous' or 'aboriginal', especially since such knowledge now apparently influences decisions such as the determination of the entitlements of people displaced by dam projects.

So, for example, a review of the Sardar Sarovar project in Central India comments that '[w]hether or not these people are truly tribal in terms of World Bank definitions is of great significance to the Bank, the people and the three Indian states ...'[14] The experts quoted by the *Independent Review* certainly had some notion that various ethnic groups located on both banks of the Narmada were indigenous in much the same way as the Indians of the Americas, and had a not dissimilar history. Felix Padel (as cited by the *Review*) wrote:

> like other tribal peoples of Central India, a tribal society analogous to those of Africa or America, particularly in the sense of their connection with the *land*: their religion is based in their relationship with their natural environment, and their economy involves a close dependence on the forest and a high degree of self-sufficiency.[15]

The *Review* then expounded its own understanding of tribal history, which was that there had been a

> great length of time during which tribe and non-tribe ... coexisted on the Indian subcontinent. Archaeological evidence indicates that it was at least 2,000 years ago when the Aryan 'newcomers' began to invade from the north. It is in relation to them that the *adivasis*, the original dwellers, constitute an aboriginal or tribal population. The *adivasis* resisted integration; they moved across large

[11] Pointed out by B. K. Roy Burman, *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples* (New Delhi: Mittal, 1994), pp. 17–18.

[12] J. Burger, *Report from the Frontier: The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1987), pp. 5, 12.

[13] G. S. Ghurye's early and scathing attack on these ideas is *The Aborigines – 'So-Called' – and Their Future* (Poona: The Gokhale Institute of Politics & Economics, 1943); see also D. R. Gadgil's preface to this work..

[14] *Sardar Sarovar: Report of the Independent Review* (Chairperson: Bradford H. Morse) (Bombay: Narmada Bachao Andolan, n.d.), p. 63.

[15] Cited in *Review* p. 67.

geographical areas as a result of economic, administrative, and military upheavals, in a web of change that spread over centuries.[16]

The author is evidently unaware that the term *adivasi* was coined but a few decades ago as an equivalent of the colonial category 'aboriginal' – and also assumes that tribal and aboriginal are synonymous. The two terms, however, have quite different meanings; tribal refers to the political organisation of a community, while aborigine means one present from the beginning (*origo*) or (literally) 'of the sunrise'. Any identification of a particular group of people as aborigines of a particular area implies the existence of a substantial genetic continuity between them and the first human populations of that region – a hypothesis with some limited validity in the New World, but quite unsubstantiated in the Old. The equivalence of tribal and aboriginal originates, in fact, in nineteenth-century racial theory, which argued that certain 'races', notably the Africans, were incapable of progressing beyond 'tribal' organisations, unless forcibly integrated into societies dominated by 'superior races'.[17] It is a consequence of this idea that aboriginals are tribal, and tribals aboriginal.

Nor is the World Bank's definition of 'tribal peoples' any more coherent than those criticised by Fried – the criteria turn largely on the presence or absence of the infrastructure of a modern state in the territory inhabited by particular groups. Applied to South Asia, it would have resulted in perhaps 90 per cent of the population of South Asia being classified as 'tribal' at the beginning of the current century. These and other problems arise from the uncritical adoption of categories from earlier paradigms, and it is for this reason that my first chapter opens with a history of racial science in relation to the classification of forest peoples. This is a necessary preliminary to a scrutiny of 'the web of change' which seeks to see it as a fabric and not a ragbag, and its component peoples as changing, adapting, and innovating in ways that cannot be fitted onto the Procrustean bed constructed by armchair anthropologists in the nineteenth century and globe-trotting consultants in the twentieth. The historical hypotheses shaped by such ideas are then compared with the findings of contemporary archaeology, as well as with some literary accounts of early Indian society, and the hypothesis that is to inform the

[16] Ibid., pp. 67–8.

[17] A point vigorously made by the anthropologist John Crawfurd, 'On the Physical and Mental Characteristics of the African or Occidental Negro', *The Ethnological Journal* (1865) 166–75; the French savant Cuvier's taxonomy noted among the specific characteristics of the 'Negro race' that 'the hordes of which it consists have always remained in the most complete state of utter barbarism.' G. Cuvier *The Animal Kingdom Arranged in Conformity with its Organisation*, trans. H. M'Murtrie, 4 vols. (New York: Carvill, 1831), I, p. 52.

later chapters is laid out. What is suggested, then, is that when the second urbanisation and agrarian settlement in the great river valleys began to elaborate the outlines of a sub-continental political and cultural system in the first millennium CE, the nascent centres of that civilisation were part of an interacting continuum of communities that occupied, thickly or thinly, the whole of South Asia. The differentiation that began to occur was socio-cultural rather than technological or productive, and the communities of the riverain plains, the forest, the savanna, the desert and the mountains co-evolved in continuous interaction involving both conflict and cooperation over the next two millennia.

The environments and lifeways in and around the forests during the current millennium form the subject of the next chapter, which emphasises the role of human activity in these zones. Taking up an issue broached in the first chapter, it considers the effects of human activity on the fauna and flora of peninsular India, and argues that it considerably modified the ecosystem. Such an argument has recently been made by James Fairhead and Melissa Leach for West Africa. Their intensive research challenges the desiccationist ideas that have dominated tropical environmentalism since the nineteenth century, and has brilliantly demolished the notion that West African forests are but the miserable remnants of vast woodlands destroyed by human action.[18] However, while *Misreading the African Landscape* convincingly shows that savannas were more extensive and woodlands smaller in the later nineteenth century than at present, and also demonstrates how agricultural settlements have promoted afforestation, it does not account for the presence of savanna in a humid tropical environment. Could it, in turn, be attributed to the range management practices of pastoral communities? Their political and ecological influence in the forest-savana mosaic of South Asia is the subject of another section. The chapter concludes with a section considering the career, semantic and social, of a mobile ethnic group – the Beda (hunters), whose first appearance on the stage of history in the seventh century CE found located them in the wooded hills of western Karnatak. It tells the story of their subsequent career as a border militia, their journey northward and their incompletely achieved aspiration to regal power and warrior status.

Moving from the examination of communities whose activities spanned considerable distances to the intensive study of a limited area, the subsequent chapter (3) looks at the processes, strategies and risks

[18] J. Fairhead and M. Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); on desiccationism, see R. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism 1600–1860* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 346–77.

involved in state-formation in the rugged jungle lands bordering the prosperous plains and wealthy ports of western India. It seeks to understand the logic of developments that unfolded over 500 years as forest chiefs fought and negotiated with the Sultanate of Gujarat, the Portuguese Estado, the Mughal Empire, the Maratha states, and finally the British Empire. In the next chapter we move on to look at the political and cultural interaction between the communities of the Sahyadri range and the potentates and invaders of the region over a similar period, noticing, in the process, the strategic use of terrains and identities by lords and peasants alike.

The next chapter shifts the geographical focus to regions and communities long regarded as archetypically 'tribal' – the Bhils and Gonds of central India. As with the 'Beda' of chapter 2, we find Bhilla to be an ethnonym that has travelled from its original home before reaching its fifteenth-century lodgement. As in the previous chapters, we find a long history of active participation by these supposedly isolated peoples in the politics of their regions – a participation curtailed only by the centralising drive of the colonial state in comparatively recent times. The subsequent chapter pulls together available materials – largely from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – in which forest peoples express their outlooks and aspirations.

These are then related to their response to the colonial regime. Its divergent social and political consequences for different groups in the forest areas are analysed next, and explanations for the variations are sought in the context of both environmental and social changes that have continued down to the present. The role that the modern regime of the forests played in isolating one segment of the population within the newly drawn boundaries of the forest is highlighted in order to make the point that the resulting primitivisation of these peoples is a recent consequence of the breakdown of their political system. The working of paralegal and extralegal forms of power in the colonial period and after, and their socio-economic effects are highlighted here. It is argued that by concentrating solely on the truncated remnant of the old hierarchy, observers overlooked the living apex of the new one, succumbed to the notion of the simple, primitive and egalitarian forest tribe, and hence failed to see the simplified, primitivised, silvicultural proletariat that it was being hammered into becoming. The divergent destinies of different forest communities in the modern era are related to their previous history and social roles. The next chapter examines the nature and impact of state policies aimed at the 'welfare' of forest communities before and after independence, as well as their interaction with broader social and political changes. It suggests that the efforts to sedentarise the

tribal communities and protect their land rights were not the unqualified failure that they are sometimes supposed to be, and that the Scheduled Tribes increasingly entrenched themselves as farmers even as this became the least rewarding sector of the Indian economy. This limited success is related to the changing politics of independent India and the chapter ends with an allusion to contemporary processes of ethnogenesis by differentiation of and infiltration into the tribal communities. This leads into the conclusion in which we review the economic, social and ideological trajectory from the past into the present, and an afterword in which I clarify my understanding of the political implications of the histories just outlined.

1 From the archaeology of mind to the archaeology of matter

Static societies, changeless races

As K. Sivaramakrishnan recently pointed out, one of the persistent ironies of postcoloniality 'has been the way elites assuming the task of building a national culture and providing it with a liberatory/progressive history have turned to modes of knowledge and reconstruction produced in the colonial period'. And of the varied strands that have constituted the twentieth-century colonial and postcolonial knowledge of India, none is more central than the notion of the timeless, conservative caste, and its antediluvian ancestor, the unchanging primitive tribe.[1] The Asians, being a non-progressive people, did not change – they merely accumulated, with the latest addition to the population overlying its predecessor, much as geological strata did. The missionary ethnographer John Wilson was one of the earliest proponents of this idea, suggesting in 1854 that conquered indigenous tribes were incorporated into 'Aryan' society as lower castes.[2] Elsewhere, he wrote that the 'Depressed Aboriginal Tribes' were 'evidently the remains of nationalities subdued and long grievously oppressed and abhorred by those who have been their conquerors, and have held themselves in every respect to be their superiors. I refer to such tribes as the Dheds of Gujarat, the Mahars or Parvaris and Mangs of the Maratha country and the Bedars of the Southern Maratha Country.'[3] He then went on to make a laboured and unconvincing effort to trace the Dheds to the Daradas and to make the Mahars the source of the regional name Maharashtra.

[1] K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'Unpacking Colonial Discourse: Notes on Using the Anthropology of Tribal India for an Ethnography of the State', *Yale Graduate Journal of Anthropology*, 5 (1993), 57; also Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 65, 69–71.

[2] John Wilson, 'Exposure of Hindu Caste', *The Oriental Christian Spectator* (January 1854).

[3] John Wilson, *Aboriginal Tribes of the Bombay Presidency: A Fragment* (Bombay Government Press, 1876), pp. 21–2.

Equally, it was not merely continuity of nomenclature, but substantial continuity of racial descent that he was seeking to establish, in order to conclude that it was principally this 'antipathy of race, then, which we see existing between the Brahmans and their Kunbi supporters on the one hand, and the degraded Dheds, Mahars, Mangs and Bedars on the other . . .'[4]

Similarly, the central Indian mountains were viewed by Charles Grant as having been a 'great natural fastness' for the aboriginal tribes, who retreated there under the impact of 'more powerful and highly organised races'. The Gond kingdoms of Deogarh and Chanda were created by a brief revanche of the aborigines, but (Grant continues)

> they were as little fitted to cope with men of Aryan descent in peace as in war; and though slow centuries of enervation under an Indian sky had relaxed the northern vigour of the races to whom they had once before succumbed, yet in every quality and attainment which can give one people superiority over another, there was probably as much difference between Hindus and Gonds as there is now between Anglo-Americans and Red Indians, or between Englishmen and New Zealanders . . . Those of the aborigines who remained were absorbed, though never so completely as to attain equality with the people who had overrun them. They form at present the lowest stratum of the Hindu social system, allowed to take rank above none but the most despised outcastes.[5]

Geology, biology and society in the nineteenth century

This attempt at understanding social classification in terms of races of descent was a central element in mid nineteenth-century science, predating the publication of *The Origin of Species* and the formulation of social Darwinism.[6] As the development of geology and the sciences undermined the authority of the Church, and political and social change appeared to be destabilising Western societies, the concept of race was invoked to support threatened hierarchies, both in colonies and metropoles.[7] Of course, the idea of superior descent from ancient conquerors had long been used in explaining human hierarchies – both Locke at the close of the seventeenth century, and Sieyes at the end of the eighteenth

[4] See his comment that 'their physiognomy evidently marks them as of Cushite origin . . . In considering them to be of Scythian or Turanian or Hamitic origin, I am not doing violence to the father of Grecian history; for it is evident that among the Scythian nations mentioned by Herodotus there must have been tribes of Hamitic as well as Japhetan descent' (ibid., p. 22).

[5] Charles Grant (ed.), *Gazetteer of the Central Provinces of India* (Nagpur: Central Provinces Government, 1870; repr. Delhi: Usha Publications, 1984), p. xiv.

[6] Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960* (Hamden CT: Archon Books, 1982).

[7] See M. Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1968), ch. 4.

had occasion to rebut it. However, the thinkers they attacked essentially argued for the inheritance of privilege along lines of patrilineal descent, with little significance attached to maternal 'blood'. Consequently the concept was still something akin to the transmission of paternal traits or patrimonial properties – not an inherent superiority inscribed in the bodily constitution of the favoured races of man.[8] The term 'race' itself was freely used as late as 1850 to mean patrilineage or descent group.[9] It was therefore freer from anxieties about miscegenation and dilution of the blood, so characteristic of later racial theory.

However, the rising tides of liberalism and socialism in the mid nineteenth century could not be effectively combated by the weakened forces of religious orthodoxy, and the new forces of science had to be invoked against them. So in 1848 – the springtime of the peoples and the seedtime of the racists – the very first issue of *The Ethnological Journal* announced that there

> never was a period in the history of the world, in which a true knowledge of human nature was so indispensable to human welfare, as it is at the present day ... The grand and fundamental idea of all modern changes is the natural equality of men ... In the name of science, we assert that the idea is *false*.[10]

The major threat to Christian orthodoxy by the 1830s was the developing science of geology, which, especially after the publication of Lyell's *Principles*, undermined the Biblical account of creation. The proponents of racial anthropology hoped that their enterprise would similarly establish itself as a science of man, and thus destroy the Biblical orthodoxy regarding the common descent of all humans and its unfortunate corollary of equality among them. Thus John Hunt, President of the Anthropological Society, wrote in the first volume of the Society's *Transactions* that if

> any plea were wanting for founding this society, I would ask you to look at the different degrees of progress which the sciences of Geology and Anthropology have made during the last fifty years ... Geology has within a few years become a great science and the most ignorant or superstitious dare not assail her conclusions.[11]

[8] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 384–98; Leon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 28–30.

[9] John Locke: 'Since if God give any thing to a man and his *Issue* in general, the claim cannot be to any one of that Issue in particular, every one that is of his Race will have an equal Right' (*Two Treatises*, p. 259). Horace Walpole wrote in the mid eighteenth century of the Cavendish family 'the talents of the race had never borne any proportion to their other advantages'. Horace Walpole. *Memoirs and Portraits* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1963), p. 154.

[10] Anon., *The Ethnological Journal* (June 1848), 28–9. Emphasis original.

[11] *Transactions of the Anthropological Society of London*, 1 (1863), 7.

Evidently successful scientific enterprises always see borrowing (not always productively) of their concepts and principles, and stratification and uniformitarianism both had an obvious appeal to conservatives struggling with revolutionaries in a period when the gradualism (uniformitarianism) of Lyell's *Principles* appeared to refute Cuvier's *Discourse on the Revolutions*.[12]

The idea soon travelled to the colonial world, where geological inquiry had become a major interest of aspirant scholars, and the idea that the most-recently added stratum was intrinsically superior to the others was bound to have considerable appeal to the newly arrived colonisers. We find this analogy enunciated as early as 1865, in a digression in a *Report on the Diet of Prisoners*:

> The ethnology of this part of the Dekhan has a great resemblance to its geology. First of all, and older than all, are the remnants of tribes that originally peopled the continent of India ... we may justly liken them to the granite rocks that underlie the trap, and crop out here and there from beneath the overlying strata.[13]

This metaphor became a central part of the anthropological paradigm that took shape through the later nineteenth century: so much so that a leading American scholar could write in 1900:

> It is a trite observation that all over Europe population has been laid down in different strata more or less horizontal ... despite their apparent homogeneity, on analysis we may still read the history of these western nations by the aid of natural science from the purely physical characteristics of their people alone.[14]

The underlying notion that the 'rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate' were ordered, if not by God, then by ancient racial difference, was more explicit in a study by the leading English anthropologist John Beddoe, which concluded optimistically in 1883 that there

> has been as yet nothing like a complete amalgamation in blood of the upper, middle and lower classes.
>
> The class of small landowners and yeomen still, to some extent represents in blood, the Saxon freemen of the 11th century.

[12] C. Lyell, *Principles of Geology* (1831; I refer to the 9th edition, London: John Murray, 1851); G. Cuvier, *A Discourse on the Revolutions of the Surface of the Globe* (London: Whittaker, Treacher & Arnot, 1829). This idea was suggested by Stephen Jay Gould's essay 'Uniformity and Catastrophe' in Gould, *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History* (London: Burnett Books 1978), pp. 147–52.

[13] Cited in F. Bruce Robinson, 'Adaptation to Colonial Rule by the "Wild Tribes" of the Bombay Deccan 1818–1880' PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 1978, pp. 9–10.

[14] William Z. Ripley, *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study* (London: Kegan Paul, 1900), p. 15.

The social agenda behind the scientific project becomes clearer when we look at papers published in the early twentieth century, when pessimism about race decline had seized the upper classes on both sides of the Atlantic. Beddoe then concluded a paper on 'Colour and Race' with the lament

> I regret the diminution of the old blond lympho-sanguine stock which has hitherto served England well in many ways, but is apparently doomed to give way to a darker and more mobile type, *largely the offspring of the proletariat* . . .[15]

It is easy to see how these ideas would have considerable resonance in colonial India, where they could build on the type of ethnographic thought illustrated at the beginning of this section. If the missionaries sought to dig out overlaid strata in the hope of finding them uncontaminated by the Hinduism that so tenaciously resisted the Gospel, the anthropologists were drawn to the hope of finding the authentic, primitive proof of their theories, uncomplicated by the processes of 'metissage' and 'miscegenation' that obscured the picture in other parts of the world. Indeed, H. H. Risley advertised India as an ethnographers' paradise on precisely such grounds: the caste system had prevented mixing, and the primitive tribes were not dying out as a consequence of western contact, and could readily be lined up at official behest to have their heads or noses measured by the visiting ethnographer. Of course, this method of required the scholar to subscribe to the myth of the caste as a closed breeding population from time immemorial – or at any rate since its first establishment by the hypothetical Aryans thousands of years ago.[16] It was only a small step from there to identify all impulses to change in South Asia as having an Aryan origin – the first wave of Aryans being the composers of the Veda, whose *mission civilisatrice* would be completed by their British cousins. The influential scholar-official Henry Maine declared:

> The truth is that all immigrations into India after the original Aryan immigration, and all conquest before the English conquest, including not only that of

[15] John Beddoe, 'Colour and Race', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 35 (1905), 237 emphasis added; for the USA, see William Z. Ripley 'The European Population of the United States', in the same journal, vol. 38 (1908).

[16] This despite the attempt of the leading French anthropologist, Paul Topinard to squash the idea; after a lengthy review of Risley's materials, he concluded that 'in the regions measured by M. Risley, India is far from being that country dreamt of by anthropologists where the distinct types display themselves, simple and classic, replicating those which legends and a history going back 4000 years and more allow us to glimpse.' The populations were, despite the effects of endogamy, far too mixed and confused for this. The research strategy that he proposed was the eminently scientific one of confining measurement to selected individuals from the most characteristic populations – which is to say, adjusting measurement to confirm any and every theory! Paul Topinard, 'L'Anthropologie du Bengale', *L'Anthropologie*, 3 (1892), 310, 314.

Alexander, but those of the Mussulmans, affected the people far more superficially than is assumed in current opinions.[17]

Similarly, Bartle Frere, a colonial official in both India and Africa suggested in 1882 that '[t]here is much to justify the conjecture that each caste marks a separate conquest of some aboriginal tribe, each tribe having had its separate work assigned to it in the organisation of the village community'. Those who were unconquered dwelt unimproved in the hills and forests 'till the European Aryan with his roads and rail-roads, his uniform codes and his centralised administration broke into the aboriginal reserve of the Warlis and Bhils, of Sonthals or Gonds or Koles, and in half a generation effected more change than Hindu Rajas or Moslem Nawabs had effected for centuries before him.'[18] The two-wave Aryan theory also carried the comforting connotation that the late-coming Aryans could look forward to as long a period of dominance over the lesser breeds without the law as their prehistoric ancestors had enjoyed.

Indigenous prejudice and colonial knowledge

Nor was this new theory wholly uncongenial to the indigenous elite in colonial India. Claims of immigration from the core areas of Islam or Hinduism were an essential element in the construction of a high-status identity, and genealogical fictions have an evident affinity to racial ones (especially as race originally meant descent group or lineage). Participation in the process of gathering colonial knowledge might also be seen as an opportunity to enhance one's own status in that system. Not surprisingly we find an Indian, 'Professor Tagore' informing the Anthropological Society in 1863 that 'the aborigines of India were cannibals, and that the eating of human flesh was a religious ceremony among the present Hindus'.[19] Another member of the Calcutta intelligentsia, Rajendralal Mitra, contributed to the Proceedings of the Anthropological Society as early as 1869, and Risley noted the alacrity with which his anthropometric exercises were assisted by various 'native gentlemen'

[17] H. S. Maine *Village Communities in the East and West* (3rd edn, New York: Holt, 1889), p. 212.

[18] H. Bartle Frere, 'On the Laws Affecting the Relations between Civilized and Savage Life, as Bearing on the Dealings of Colonists with Aborigines', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, 11 (1882), 315, 317. Interestingly enough, in the discussion that followed Francis Galton challenged the whole concept of the stability of racial characteristics through time by defining them as 'the average of the characteristics of all the persons who were supposed to belong to the race, and this average was continually varying' (ibid., pp. 352–3). But unlike his eugenic prognostications, this idea did not cater to existing social prejudice, and hence passed unnnoticed.

[19] *Transactions of the Anthropological Society of London*, 1 (1863), 186.

in eastern India. Risley reciprocated by establishing via the highly scientific nasal index that the caste hierarchy was based on measurable indices of racial difference, and that the upper castes of Bengal were definitely 'Aryan'. If their heads were inconveniently brachycephalic, then they had derived this trait from the Indo-Burmese, but definitely not from the 'black races' of central and southern India.[20] Anthropometrically identical traits – dolichocephaly, for example – could be assigned to Aryan or non-Aryan racial origins, depending on the contemporary caste status of the group, so that no measurement could ever disprove the theory.[21] An example of how the elites of north India adopted – and adapted – Risley appeared in a north Indian periodical, the *Oudh Akhbar* in 1890; Risley's measurements apparently revealed

> the existence of different races of men in Bengal, namely the Aryan and the aboriginal. The former is represented by the Brahmans, Rajputs and Sikhs. These generally have tall forms, light complexion and fine noses, and are in general appearance superior to the middle class of Europeans. The Kols are a specimen of the latter. They have short stature, dark complexion and snub noses, and approach the African blacks in appearance ... the higher [a man's] origin, the more he resembles the Europeans in appearance.[22]

Racial ethnography was thus being appropriated by the indigenous elites to justify indigenous hierarchy on the one hand, and to assert parity with the European upper classes, on the other. When Risley and his associates were able to sell the policy-making value of ethnography to the Government of India, and to give the Census of 1901 a definite ethnographic slant,[23] this in turn contributed much to assertions and claims of status by various groups in Indian society, the upper strata of which took enthusiastically to racism, and the academic study of 'raciology'.[24]

So, for example, Anantha Krishna Iyer, first Reader in Ethnography at Calcutta University in 1925 connected the 'Dravidians' with the Africans, Melanesians and Australians:

> Their spoor [*sic*!] may be everywhere followed from the flat-faced curl-haired Koch of Assam with thick protuberant lips of the Negro to the dark and irregularly featured Nepalese, to the Santhals of Chota Nagpur as also the low-caste hillmen of Southern India. They might justly be regarded as the

[20] Risley, 'Ethnology in India', pp. 255–6.
[21] See ibid., p. 256 for an example.
[22] Cited in Khondkar Fuzlee Rubbee, *On the Origins of the Mussalmans of Bengal*, p. 48 first published 1895; repr. in *Journal of the East Pakistan History Association*, 1, 1 (1968).
[23] See the correspondence in D. Natarajan (ed.), *Indian Census Through a Hundred Years*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Office of the Registrar-General, nd), II, pp. 545–51.
[24] See, for example, 'Indian Physical Anthropology and Raciology: Ramaprasad Chanda's Contribution', *Science and Culture*, 8 (Nov. 1942).

unimproved descendants of the manufacturers of the stone implements found in the Damodar coal-fields.

The new 'science' of course, confirmed the old hierarchy in his home region, Kerala: 'we find Negroid features in the types among the hillmen and the agrestic serfs, and Dravidian features among the people of the plains, and fine Aryan characteristics among the people of the higher castes . . .'[25]

Now, if the Saiyads, Brahmans, Kayasthas, Bhumihars, Nambuthiris etc. were the penultimate stratum of the racial hierarchy, with only the more aristocratic of the British Aryans above them, the lowest castes, and even more, the forest dwellers had to be the oldest and lowest stratum. This identification once again played into the current prejudices of the indigenous elites regarding the forest and its inhabitants, and could be integrated as easily into their beliefs as racial theories could.[26] To be linked with the wilderness, the jungle, was by definition pejorative from ancient times down to the nineteenth century: so, for example, the Marathas in Malwa showed their contempt for their Rajput subjects by deconstructing the regional name *Rangadi* to mean *Ran* + *gadi* or jungle + servant, thus capturing two inferior statuses in a single spurious etymology.[27] Forest folk (*jangli*) were the definitive others against whom civilised folk measured themselves. A century later, the Dutch anthropologist Breman observed that the hilly tract of eastern Gujarat was inappropriately described as 'jungle': 'the pejorative characterisation is intended to emphasise the backwardness of the area and its population.'[28] Equally illustrative of these attitudes were the widespread legends that claimed that the founders of ruling chiefdoms had all won their power by conquering or expelling wild folk, Bhils, Bhars, Cheros and others. The nineteenth-century legends often identified some local caste of pig-breeders as the descendants of the conquered autochthones.[29] It is a moot point why this motif was so widespread among claimants to landholding status in the early nineteenth century –

[25] L. K. A. Krishna Iyer, *Lectures on Ethnography* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1925), pp. 49–51.

[26] A point still valid today; see, for example, Schendel, 'The Invention of "Jummas"' pp. 102–3.

[27] Reported in the early nineteenth century by John Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India including Malwa*, 2 vols. (1823; repr. Delhi: Sagar Publications, 1970), II, p. 191.

[28] Jan Breman, *Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers: Rural Labour Circulation and Capitalist Production in West India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 196.

[29] For the Bhils, see Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, I, pp. 519–23; Bhars and Cheros figure in most nineteenth-century accounts of the historical traditions of North India; see, for example H. M. Elliott, *Memoirs on the History, Folk-Lore and Distribution of the Races of the North-Western Provinces*, ed. and rev. John Beames (London: Trubner, 1869), pp. 33–4, 59–62.

but it might be suggested that the legend of conquest was necessary to an affirmation of warrior status for the landlords. The frequent identification of very low castes as the former owners was probably intended to convey the utter impossibility of a revival of their claims to the land, since these groups were typically retained as village drudges, excluded from cultivation and land control. The fact that their testimony was preferred in cases of boundary disputes may be seen as evidence not of their autochthonous nature, but of their total exclusion from landholding, which would make them more impartial than the other villagers on this matter. Such legends were grist to the mill of the speculative ethnographer-historians of the later nineteenth century, who read them naively as depictions of the past instead of as claims in the present. The relatively small number of the alleged autochthones fitted well with the widespread Western belief that such 'lower races' were fated to die out in the presence of superior specimens of mankind.[30] When, however, the four or five centuries preceding the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate were studied on the basis of contemporary epigraphs and other records, no trace of the Bhar chiefs, the Tharu gentry or the Bhil kinglets could be found in the areas where nineteenth-century traditions would have placed them; instead we find various dynasties all making claims to aristocratic origin no less strident than those made a millennium later.[31]

The euhemeristic reading of fables continued undeterred. So the Vedic and Pauranic depictions of demons and ogres were read as exercises in physical anthropology by at least one Reader – Alfred Haddon, University Reader in Ethnology at Cambridge, who declared in 1910 that it was 'hardly an exaggeration to say that from these sources there might be compiled a fairly accurate anthropological definition of the jungle tribes today'.[32] Nor was he unique in this – Topinard (evidently on the basis of some garbled echo of the Ramayana) identified the first race to inhabit India as a short black people, 'similar to

[30] Enunciated by many scholars, including Alfred Wallace, *Anthropological Review*, 5 (1867), 103–5; A. L. F. Pitt-Rivers, *The Evolution of Culture and Other Essays*, ed. J. L. Myers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), p. 54; and Charles Lyell. The last-named wrote in 1853: 'few future events are more certain than the speedy extermination of the Indians of North America and the savages of New Holland in the course of a few centuries . . .' (*Principles of Geology*, p. 700).

[31] See R. C. Majumdar (ed.), *The History and Culture of the Indian People Vol. IV: The Age of Imperial Kanauj* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951) chs. 1–3, 5 for the details.

[32] A. C. Haddon, *A History of Anthropology* (New York: Putnam, 1910), pp. 9–10. Eighty years later the same euhemeristic reading appears in S. Wolpert, *A New History of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 40–1. All that is needed to complete the research would be the discovery that Ravana was a Siamese dectuplet, and Kumbhakarna a sufferer from sleeping sickness.

monkeys'.[33] So indigenous alterity and western anxiety combined to create a stereotype of the forest folk that was to have a powerful effect on society and politics in India down to the present. A masterful, if polemical picture of the British census classifications and the resulting contradictions and confusions was given by G. S. Ghurye fifty years ago.[34] But the archetype once formed outlasted the colonial regime and the racial anthropology that had generated it, and remains a powerful identity in late twentieth-century India.

We may take as an example the work of V. Raghaviah, office-bearer of the Bharatiya Adeemjati Sevak Sangh, or (to translate literally) the Indian Union of Servants of the Primeval Caste. This book appeared in 1968, with commendatory prefaces from the President, Vice-President and other officials of the Republic of India. It illustrates how the previously existing stereotypes, plus nineteenth-century racial theory were inverted, but not rejected by those interested in the 'welfare' of the scheduled tribes. To begin with, being far from civilisation was glossed as being close to nature: 'As correctly portrayed, the tribals are the children of the jungles, they are the flowers of the forest.' Equally, what had formerly been viewed as savage bellicosity could now be read as patriotic zeal:

> Though cruelly and unjustly driven into these unwholesome, unwelcome mountain fastnesses by ruthless invading hordes superior in numbers as in their brain power, and the tribals' fertile and alluvial lands in the Ganjetic [*sic*] valley occupied, yet these millions of militant patriots acted as the sentinels of India's freedom, through ages of unrecorded and perhaps unrecognised history.[35]

Both condescension and understanding have been taken over from late colonial ethnography, and used to justify a project – that of paternalist uplift, that had also begun under colonialism. Equally, their history is seen as constituted by two events – one which took place thousands of years ago, when they were driven into the forests, and the second in contemporary times, when they were being excluded from them; between these two they dwelt untouched by history. The only missing element is their classification as valuable specimens for the museum of mankind. Nor was the understanding of professional anthropologists very different – Stephen Fuchs for example, published in 1973 the following hypothetical reconstruction of the history of the 'aboriginal tribes':

[33] Topinard, 'L'Anthropologie', p. 290.
[34] G. S. Ghurye, *The Aborigines – 'So-Called' – and Their Future* (Pune: Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, 1943), ch. 1.
[35] V. Raghaviah, *Nomads* (Secunderabad: Bharateeya Adeemjati Sevak Sangh, 1968), p. 397.

Many of the aboriginal tribes in India were without doubt in ancient times simply food gatherers and primitive hunters. When their hunting and collecting grounds were gradually appropriated by cultivating immigrants coming from distant lands, and in the possession of a superior culture, the food-gathering tribes had to yield to them. Some of the tribes allowed themselves to be subdued and assimilated by the new-comers, others escaped into areas still comparatively free of settlers, and others again retained their nomadic and collecting way of life in defiance of the new situation.[36]

It appears to have escaped Fuchs that 'in ancient times' everyone's ancestors, not excluding his own, were food-gatherers and hunters; and more seriously, that his formulation, if it is to mean anything at all, assumes that the present-day social divisions of society track primeval racial lines of descent. Professional historians have also subscribed to variants of this model; for example, a widely used text-book declared in 1968 that there had been 'six main races' in India: the Negrito, the proto-Australoid, the Mongoloid, the Mediterranean, the Western Brachycephals, and the Nordic, and even identified the languages of three of these groupings.

The proto-Australoids were the basic element in the Indian population, and their speech was of the Austric linguistic group, a specimen of which survives in the Munda speech of certain primitive tribes. The Mediterranean race is generally associated with Dravidian culture ... The last to come were the Nordic peoples better known as the Aryans.[37]

D. D. Kosambi, one of the most original of the historians of India, could not completely shake off the hold of these ideas, largely due to his overrating the importance of technological progress in historical causation. Thus he believed that the introduction of a stable agriculture was impossible without the availability of iron, and that such settled populations would experience such dramatic improvements in food availability as to cause their numbers to increase rapidly and marginalise other forms of subsistence.

Thus even such an acute scholar as Kosambi visualised the technical superiority of agriculture as a mode of production leading inevitably to the explosive expansion of agricultural populations, and ending in the subjugation and encapsulation of the pre-agricultural societies, with this in turn, contributing to the emergence of a caste order. The unsubdued hunter-gatherers were thrust into the forests and their descendants are the 'tribals' of twentieth-century India: 'Munda, Oraon, Bhil, Todas, Kadar ... What has fossilized them is refusal of each tiny splinter to take

[36] S. Fuchs, *The Aboriginal Tribes of India* (Bombay: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 45–6.
[37] Romila Thapar, *A History of India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), I, pp. 26–7. Thapar no longer holds these views – see Romila Thapar (ed.), *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1993), p. 80.

to regular food production, to acknowledge and utilize the productive systems of encircling society.'[38] This inexplicable 'refusal' is evidently seen as a voluntary act, internally determined, and unrelated to the opportunities and alternatives offered by the dominant agrarian order. Yet when Kosambi himself carried out a pioneering foray into ethnohistory by discussing the Phase Pardhi community near Pune in the context of this hypothesis, he observed that as soon as the Pardhi community in question got access to some land they started growing vegetables, and were even prepared to pay rent to the alleged owner – so it could be argued that they may have been extruded from the agricultural economy and not intruded into it.[39]

Since the above-cited passages were written, the new environmental consciousness has also selected the scheduled tribes to be its precursors, and endowed them with a mystical closeness to and knowledge of nature. Pereira and Seabrook write of the Varli of west Maharashtra that they 'survived for millennia in harmony with their environment and without oppressing others'.[40] Again, the widely read *Citizen's Report on the Environment* claimed that it is only recently that landlessness and joblessness have caused 'even groups like the tribals who from time immemorial have lived in total harmony with forests . . . [to turn] against forests and want to sell them off as fast as they can'.[41] We see again the picture of a timeless harmony with nature disturbed only in very recent times by the intrusive forces of the State and the market.

Social segments or living fossils?

Such ideas have been sharply criticised in recent times in other parts of the world by both archaeologists and anthropologists. In fact, it has been vigorously argued that the survival of foragers in tropical rain forests depended on the presence of cultivators from whom supplementary nutrients could be procured; and that 'humans have never lived, and could not have lived in tropical rain forest independently of cultivated foods . . .'[42] Conclusive evidence on human populations and subsistence strategies in pre-agricultural times has obviously been

[38] D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay: Popular, 1956), pp. 20–31; citation from pp. 24–5.
[39] Ibid., pp.26–8, 31.
[40] W. Pereira and J. Seabrook, *Asking the Earth* (London: Earthscan, 1990), p. 33.
[41] *The State of India's Environment 1984–85 – The Second Citizen's Report*, p. 376.
[42] R. C. Bailey and T. N. Headland, 'The Tropical Rain Forest: Is It a Productive Environment for Human Foragers?', *Human Ecology*, 19, 2 (1991), 261. The whole issue of *Human Ecology* is devoted to this controversy, and a lengthy bibliography of relevant work is appended to the paper cited.

difficult to find, but the notion that foraging peoples (even in areas like interior Amazonia) began interacting with cultivators in very recent times has been largely abandoned.

In Africa, the San peoples of the Kalahari have long been cited as neolithic survivals, and studied as such down to the 1970s. However, Edwin Wilmsen has convincingly demonstrated that their excision from history was due to the nineteenth-century European search for specimens of the savage hunting stage. By a brilliant rereading of both literary and archaeological sources, he has shown that the apparent isolation of these peoples at the beginning of the present century, far from being a primeval condition, was a consequence of the immediately preceding collapse of trading networks exporting ivory, ostrich feathers etc. to the Western market. So peoples with a far simpler political organisation and more limited technical repertoire than that of the bulk of the scheduled tribes of India were none the less the product of prolonged interactions with larger regional and continental social systems, and their primitiveness was externally defined and enforced.[43] Could it be that South Asia was an exception to historic processes generally, or is it that these questions have rarely been asked of the evidence for this sub-continent?

A historical questioning of the archaeological record

The brutal and dramatic encounter of European and aborigine in the Americas and Australia has perhaps had an excessive influence on the understandings of migration and cultural change in South Asia and elsewhere.[44] S. A. Gregg has proposed that the first neolithic farmers in Central Europe could have lived in symbiosis with the foragers around them, and that seasonal surpluses could have been exchanged to the

[43] Edwin Wilmsen, *Land Filled With Flies: A Political Economy of the Kalahari* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), esp. pp. xii, 127, chs. 1–4 ; also the papers in Tim Ingold, David Riches, and James Woodburn (eds.), *Hunters and Gatherers I: History, Evolution and Social Change* (Oxford: Berg, 1988).

[44] K. W. Butzer and L. G. Freeman's Preface to Susan A. Gregg, *Foragers and Farmers* (Chicago University Press, 1988), pp. xv–xvi states that Gordon Childe unconsciously succumbed to this impression, though I have not been able to locate any specific statement to this effect in his writings. However, it clearly underlay the Aryan hypothesis by Charles Grant and Bartle Frere, among others – see the citations in the text, above. The Ethnological Committee of the Central Provinces (1868) saw the tribal people as analogous to a remnant animal population, with the Provinces as a 'thick bit of cover in the middle of open country . . . when the plains all round have been swept by hunters, or cleared by colonists, you are sure to find all the wild animals that have not been exterminated.' Cited in Grant (ed.), *Gazetteer of the Central Provinces*, pp. cv–cvi.

advantage of both communities;[45] and as we saw, it has been argued that many forest areas of the tropics only became accessible to foragers in relatively recent times because of the possibility of supplementing the yield of wild plant and animal foods with cultivated foods supplied by local agriculturists.

Two leading archaeologists have argued for a similar understanding of prehistoric South Asia. The Allchins write that

> in the Indian sub-continent distinct, self-contained social groups, at different levels of cultural and technological development, survived right into this century. They include hunting and collecting tribes, pastoral nomads, shifting cultivators, traditional settled agriculturists, modern 'developed' agriculturists and several levels of modern industrial society, all co-existing and economically interdependent. This provides us with a basic model for past developments.[46]

Uncritically applied, of course, such an approach faces the danger of anachronism, and so we shall briefly review the evidence on the various cultural traits that are said to have conferred a decisive advantage on the hypothetical immigrant (Aryan?) folk who drove the aborigines into cover. Let us first consider agriculture and cattle-rearing. To begin with, there is considerable evidence that the domestication of plants and animals occurred at various sites in the sub-continent and its borders. Thus archaeological sites in the Kaimur hills south-east of Allahabad have yielded evidence of the presence of communities that hunted game and collected wild rice in the eighth millennium BCE, and subsequently introduced domesticated rice and tame animals into their diet by the fifth millennium. At one of these sites there was clear evidence of cattle being penned, and sheep and goats reared. Similarly, the sixth millennium BCE inhabitants of Adamgarh, in the upper Narmada valley, (Hoshangabad district) had apparently domesticated dogs, cattle, buffaloes, sheep, goats and pigs.[47] It is perhaps significant that the wild ancestor of the Indian *Bos indicus*, *bos primigenius namadicus* was missing from the archaeological record of the Holocene, (with possible survival in a few pockets), though *indicus* was widely found.[48] This would suggest that it may have been pushed into extinction, hybridised or marginalised, by competition from domesticated and feral varieties of *indicus*, which in turn suggests the ubiquity of human presence and activity.

[45] Gregg, *Foragers and Farmers*.
[46] Bridget and Raymond Allchin, *The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan* (Cambridge University Press, 1982) p. 62.
[47] B. K. Thapar, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries in India* (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), pp. 39–41, 51.
[48] P. K. Thomas and P. P. Joglekar, 'Holocene Faunal Studies in India', *Man and Environment*, 19, 2 (1994), 188.

Turning from animals to plants, the sixth–fifth millennium BCE also saw local strains of wheat and barley, as well as the cotton plant being cultivated at Mehrgarh in Baluchistan.[49] Rather later, third–second millennium, farming spread in Malwa and the western Deccan. Dhavalikar remarks of Maharashtra that it witnessed

> an inordinately prolonged mesolithic phase from about 10000 B.C. to 2000 B.C. when the technique of food production was introduced. The region, at least the Godavari and the Bhima valleys, was dotted with numerous encampments of mesolithic hunter-gatherers. In the beginning, during the Savalda (Circa 2000–1800 B.C.) and the late Harappan times, these early farmers do not seem to have converted any of the hunter-gatherers into food producers ... Later, the hunter-gatherers seem to be shedding their aversion to the food-producing technology if the number of their habitations is any indication. They were however quite successful in the Godavari and Pravara valley, but not in the Bhima valley. All this evidence enables us to visualise a situation at least in the Bhima valley, where the entire region was occupied by hunter-gatherers of the mesolithic complex, and that too quite heavily, whereas in between there were permanent settlements of the early farming societies, forming sort of islands of luxury, with their inhabitants enjoying sedentary life of leisure with an assured and bountiful food supply all the year around.[50]

This situation of abundance, if it existed, may have been temporary: the archaeological evidence does not support the consistent superiority of farming as a subsistence strategy in much of India for some millennia after its appearance, and the great agricultural civilisation of the Indus Valley ultimately collapsed and disappeared, leaving the plains of west Punjab and Sindh depopulated for a millennium or more.[51] At the same time, farming villages continued to exist elsewhere in India, but the populations of the largest of them never seem to have approached the sizes of the defunct Harappan cities. Clearly, they also lacked the explosive growth and striking technological and economic advantage over pastoral and foraging people that historians such as Kosambi presumed them to have. In fact, the Jorwe people studied by Dhavaliker gradually began incorporating wild animals and collected seeds in their diet as their agriculture failed in the face of increasing aridity, and then finally gave up agriculture, taking perhaps to cattle rearing or foraging.[52] But as agriculture was abandoned at Jorwe, it was established at various locations in Vidarbha, where the builders of megalithic burial circles used a wide range of plants.[53] It is also at the sites of these people in the south-central peninsula that the earliest evidence for the use of iron in

[49] Allchin and Allchin, *The Rise of Civilization*, p. 109.
[50] M. K. Dhavalikar, *First Farmers of the Deccan* (Pune: Ravish, 1988), p. 7f.
[51] W. A. Fairservis, *The Roots of Ancient India* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), p. 398.
[52] Dhavaliker, *First Farmers*, pp. 34–5.
[53] M. D. Kajale, 'Archaeobotanical Investigations on Megalithic Bhagimohari and its

south India is to be found, more or less simultaneously with its appearance in north India, or about the end of the second millennium BCE.

Contemporaneous chalcolithic villagers in central India were already establishing a pattern of seasonal migration to rock shelters in the hills of Malwa in this period (ending 800 BCE) – shortly after this there was an association of red ware and iron, characteristic of the megalithic culture of the peninsula at these sites, suggesting movements from south to north. The meat the sojourners consumed was almost exclusively that of domesticated animals, suggesting either that they levied tribute on the herds of nearby agriculturists, or that they were themselves graziers sent out by the villages to take advantage of seasonal fodder resources; or indeed that both these strategies were followed by successive users of the rock-shelters. Interestingly, there was evidence (in the form of slag) of local smelting and iron-working so that the itinerants of the forest had access to state-of-the-art military technology.[54] Kosambi's argument that the centralised state of Magadha rose because of its monopoly of the iron sources of south Bihar ignores the widespread availability of iron ore for small-scale local production all over India, with the exception of alluvial valleys. Indeed, by about 1000 BCE 'virtually the whole of the sub-continent came to possess a close familiarity with the use of iron'; and Chakrabarti and Lahiri have shown that the metallurgists of the earlier Harappan period were aware of its existence.[55] It was therefore no monopoly of the hypothetical 'Aryans'.

The archaeological culture usually identified with the Aryans has been the Painted Grey Ware, though as D. K. Chakrabarti has cogently remarked, 'one fails to understand how a class of pottery basically found e[ast] of the Sutlej and a culture having rice, pig, and buffalo among its components can be related to anything coming from the n[orth]-w[est]'.[56] So if the PGW people, or indeed the inhabitants of the Ganges valley had no monopoly of iron, neither (as we have seen) were they cultivators surrounded by savages ignorant of that valuable art. Quite apart from the defunct Harappan culture and its successors, there were numerous communities throughout India that had successfully

Significance for Ancient Indian Agricultural System', *Man and Environment*, 13 (1989), 87–100.

54 J. Jacobson, 'Static Sites and Peripatetic Peoples', in L. L. Leshnik and G. D. Sontheimer (eds.), *Pastoralists and Nomads in South Asia* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975).

55 This was pointed out by Dilip K. Chakrabarti and N. Lahiri, 'The Iron Age in India: The Beginning and Consequences', *Puratattva*, 1993–94, 12–13.

56 In A. Ghosh (ed.), *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, 2 vols. (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1989), I, p. 109.

domesticated a wide range of plants and animals a thousand or more years before the beginnings of the PGW at the end of the second millennium BCE: furthermore, many, if not most of these were located, not in what became the core cultural area of the central Gangetic plain, but in hilly peripheral regions that, in nineteenth-century folklore, had been till medieval times the domain of 'wild tribes', such as the Kaimur ranges.

So the processes of economic and cultural unification that commenced in the later first millennium incorporated peoples acquainted with agricultural, pastoral and foraging strategies, who may well have switched between these as circumstances rendered expedient. What is suggested, then, is that when the second urbanisation and agrarian settlement in the great river valleys began to elaborate the outlines of a sub-continental political and cultural system during the first millennium CE, the nascent centres of that civilisation were part of an interacting continuum of communities that occupied, thickly or thinly, the whole of South Asia. The differentiation that began to occur was socio-cultural as well as technological, and the communities of the riverain plains, the forest, the savanna, the desert and the high mountains co-evolved in continuous interaction involving both conflict and cooperation over the next two millennia. Each community's habitat was a resource for it: a resource defined not merely in economic, but in political and cultural terms. The boundaries and aspirations of communities were defined by the presence of other communities, other ways of living – identities generated by contrasts; and one of the most crucial of these contrasts was betwen the the civilised and their domesticated landscape, and the savages in their wild woods.[57] George Erdosy has recently suggested a similar model, in which *arya* is to be seen as 'a cultural, rather than a racial, category . . .' and one characteristic of a rapidly spreading ideology which diverse ethnic groups came to adopt. However, his suggestion that pottery designs and punch-marked coins marked ethnic boundaries is rather implausible:[58] the function of money is precisely to cross boundaries, and aspects of the publicly displayed persona such as clothing, adornment and speech, are much better markers of identity than motifs on objects of domestic use. Equally, Erdosy fails to consider

[57] For an erudite and wide-ranging consideration of these issues within the Sanskrit canon, see F. Zimmerman, *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), chs.1–3. Zimmerman's speculations about the historical expansion of the 'Aryans' are, however, not supported by the archaeological evidence to date.

[58] George Erdosy, 'The Prelude to Urbanization' in F. R. Allchin, *The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 91–7.

the connection between the life-style and the ecological locus of particular communities, both surely crucial elements in ethnogenesis.[59]

Monarchical systems and stratified societies were in place in the central Gangetic plain by the time Graeco-Roman accounts of India came to be written (fourth century BCE onward), and there are suggestions that communities occupying diverse terrains were already integrated into a common political economy. All the classical reports concur in describing the population as made up of hereditary occupational groups, one of which was the nomadic herdsmen and hunters. Arrian's *Indica* stated that the

> third caste among the Indians consists of the herdsmen, both shepherds and neatherds [cattle-keepers]; and these neither live in the cities nor in villages, but are nomadic and live on the hills. They too are subject to tribute, and this they pay in cattle. They scour the country in pursuit of fowl and wild beasts.

Strabo, citing Megasthenes, who had been ambassador at the court of Chandragupta Maurya, wrote

> The third caste is that of the shepherds and hunters, who alone are permitted to hunt, to breed cattle and to sell or hire out beasts of burden; and in return for freeing the land from wild beasts and seed-picking birds, they receive proportionate allowances of grain from the king, leading as they do, a wandering and tent-dwelling life.

The natural historian Pliny added another occupational group: 'In addition to these classes there is one half-wild, which is constantly engaged in a task of immense labour ... that of hunting and taming elephants.'[60]

It would appear from this evidence that various life-ways were integrated into a complex political economy by the last centuries BCE, and that communities located in specific environmental niches specialised in particular activities. Some may have paid tribute to the kings, others been paid in kind by the villages. Occasionally, there may have been a testing of relationships by raiding and reprisal – a possibility suggested by Asoka's warning to the forest peoples in his dominions:

> And the forest folk who live in the dominions of the Beloved of the Gods, even them he entreats and exhorts in regard to their duty. It is hereby explained to them that, in spite of his repentance, the Beloved of the Gods possesses power

[59] The skeletal remains, incidentally, yield no evidence of a biological basis for differentiation according to K. A. R. Kennedy, 'Have Aryans been Identified in the Prehistoric Skeletal Record from South Asia?', in G. Erdosy (ed.), *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language Culture and Ethnicity* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995).

[60] Citations in order of appearance are from R. C. Majumdar, *The Classical Accounts of India* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1960), p. 237, 264, 342.

enough to punish them for their crimes, so that they would turn from their evil ways and would not be killed for their crimes.[61]

It has already been suggested that different communities formed components in an integrated political economy marked by a specialisation and the attendant simplifications in equipment, mental and physical. Further evidence of the process of integration through differentiation and specialisation is to be found in linguistic evidence cited by H. L. Jain, who ingeniously uses the *Natyashastra* of Bharata to infer the distribution of languages and dialects at the time the work was composed. As cited by Jain, Bharata explains that apart from regional variants of Prakrit

> there are the languages used by *Sabaras, Abhiras, Chandalas, Sacharas, Dravidas, Odras*, and *Vanacharas* which are of an inferior type and are known as *Vibhasha*. The distribution of these languages in a drama according to professions and regions is interesting. Pulkasas, charcoal-makers, hunters, and wood- or grass-sellers use *Panchali* with the sibilants. Those who trade in elephants, horses, goats, camels and the like, and those who dwell in pastoral settlements use the *Sabara* language . . . *Abhiras* speak *Sabari* . . .[62]

One may infer then, that these occupational-cum-ethnic communities were sufficiently distinct for them to have characteristic ways of speaking, on the one hand, but also sufficiently integrated for an upper-class audience to understand actors using these dialectal variants, on the other. Integration may have been both political – grain-shares, livestock tributes – and economic, via the exchange of meat, wood, grass and other products.

The social differentiation described above had both political and economic aspects – forests, seasonal pastures, cultivated fields all provided resources exploitable by specialists, and the various communities were constituted by their specialisations. However, neither the composition nor the location of a particular community was fixed. Lands were cleared for agriculture – but lands also became covered with jungle; trade routes were opened but routes were also abandoned; cities were founded but cities vanished. The archaeological record at many sites has sterile layers, indicating periods when the location was abandoned before being reoccupied. This was true, for example, of much of western India between the fifth and twelfth centuries CE, as noted by M. S. Mate.[63] Similarly, herdsmen settled to till or to tax the tillers, but

[61] D. C. Sircar (ed. and trans.), *Inscriptions of Asoka* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1957), p. 53.

[62] H. L. Jain, 'Apabhramsha Language and Literature', in *The Age of Imperial Kanauj*, pp. 212–13. Jain dates the text to the early centuries of the Christian era.

[63] M. S. Mate, 'The Clay Feet?' *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, 49 (1990), 247–9.

cultivators shifted to herding; swidden farmers took to the plough but ploughmen fled into the forests. Certain habitats and habituses persisted through time – but their geographical locations and human occupants were in recurrent flux. The rest of this work will attempt to identify the patterns that persisted through this flux.

2 Subsistence and predation at the margins of cultivation

Introduction

The opening chapter of this work was, I must admit, a swift slash-and-burn exercise, intended to clear the ground for my own hypotheses, and it is now incumbent on me to cover the devastated terrain. This chapter begins that process, commencing with a quick survey of the landscapes and biota of the Dakhan in the current millennium. It then considers the opportunities that this ecological mosaic gave humans, and how they sought to exploit it (and each other) in that period, and how they clashed and coalesced in that effort. The first section demonstrates the extent to which humans modified the environment to suit their livestock, and so the second one considers the significance of pastoralism in the political economy of the peninsula. The subsequent section then discusses how periods of agrarian crisis might result in the political dominance of such pastoral communities pending the cyclical re-establishment of agriculture. The ecological warfare that accompanied the re-establishment of the agrarian order is the next theme examined, followed by a consideration of inter-community relations in the woodland itself. The chapter concludes with a case-study illustrative of the mutability and mobility that characterised the human communities of the sub-continent through the study of an ethnic group that moved from being forest warriors to being professional musketeers and police. Their transition to gentry status failed, and one of their ethnonyms vanished, and another became a Scheduled Caste in Maharashtra.

Nature, culture and landscape in peninsular India

If the archaeological record is replete with details of material life and productive technology, the literary sources are generally marked by a lofty neglect of them, and this disdain must necessarily leave its imprint on a study such as the present one, which depends essentially upon the latter. Our understandings of politico-economic relations in earlier

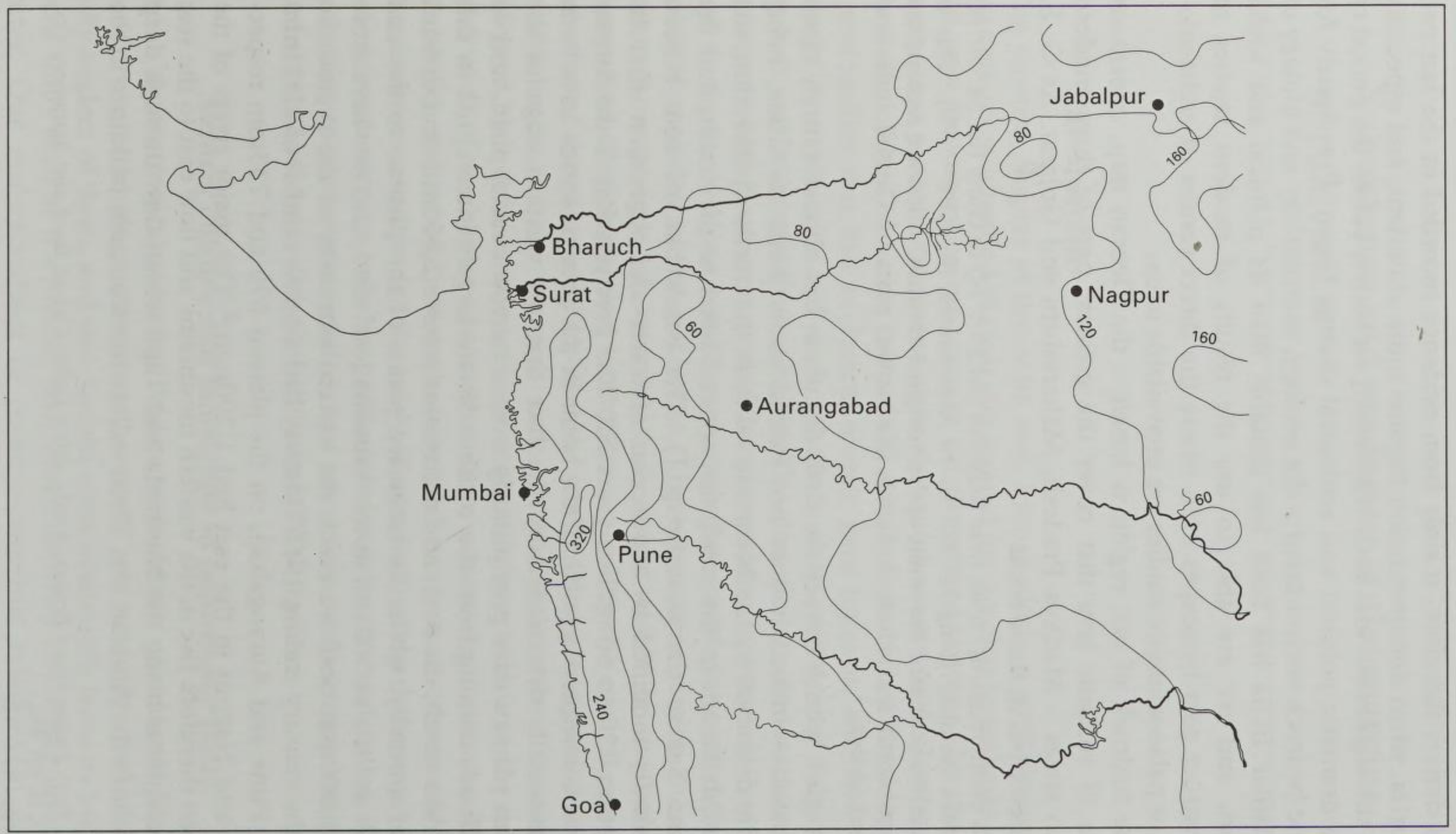
times derive, therefore, mainly from evidence recorded in the last two centuries, when documentation became more abundant, and especially from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before the period of really dramatic political and ecological change began. Fortunately for us, the bedrock environment – the geology, metereology and biology of peninsular India has been less mutable than its political and social system, and we are able to use the results of modern studies to reconstruct past bioscapes even where the direct results of archaeological or palaeoclimatic studies are unavailable to us.

The bedrock of our region is basalt – the Deccan trap, enormous sheets of volcanic lava that cover the greatest part of three modern Indian states – Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. As G. S. Puri describes it, these rocks

> stretch uninterruptedly from near Belgaum (lat.15 5′ N) to Guna (lat.24° 30′ N) and from Bombay (long.72° 50′ E) to Amarkantak (long.81° 50′E). This is however, by no means the whole of their original extent. Outliers are represented both on north and south in Cutch, Kathiawar, parts of Central India and Hyderabad state.[1]

The region whose history we shall discuss is lies almost entirely upon this basalt – indeed it does not extend as far north as Guna, being broadly delimited by the Narmada valley in the northerly direction, the upper Mahanadi in the west, the upper Kaveri to the south, and the Arabian Sea to the west (map 1). The basalt has, of course been profoundly modified by the action of water and vegetation after its formation 120 to 60 million years BP. The precipitation of the former and the consequent growth of the latter in the present epoch have been fundamentally determined by the fact that the western edge of the Deccan plateau rises precipitously from a narrow coastal plain, and so rain-clouds coming from the south-west are largely intercepted in this area. As a result, the coast and mountains receive 2,000mm and upward of rain annually, while the extensive plains of the plateau to the east receive as little as 500mm in the 'rain-shadow' tract, and nowhere more than 1,000mm until we reach the eastern extremity of the region. So over the century ending 1950 Bombay had a mean rainfall of 1,821mm while Pune and Aurangabad, on the plateau 699 and 735mm respectively and Nagpur in the east had 1,200mm.[2] The major rivers of the Dakhan therefore rise in the western mountains and flow east to the sea; the exceptions being the Narmada and Tapti which flow through deep valleys into the Arabian sea. Their valleys mark ancient faultlines in the

[1] G. S. Puri, *Indian Forest Ecology*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Oxford Book and Stationery Co., 1960), II, pp. 491–2.
[2] Ibid., pp. 338–41.



Map 1 Western India: rainfall (in millimetres) and rivers

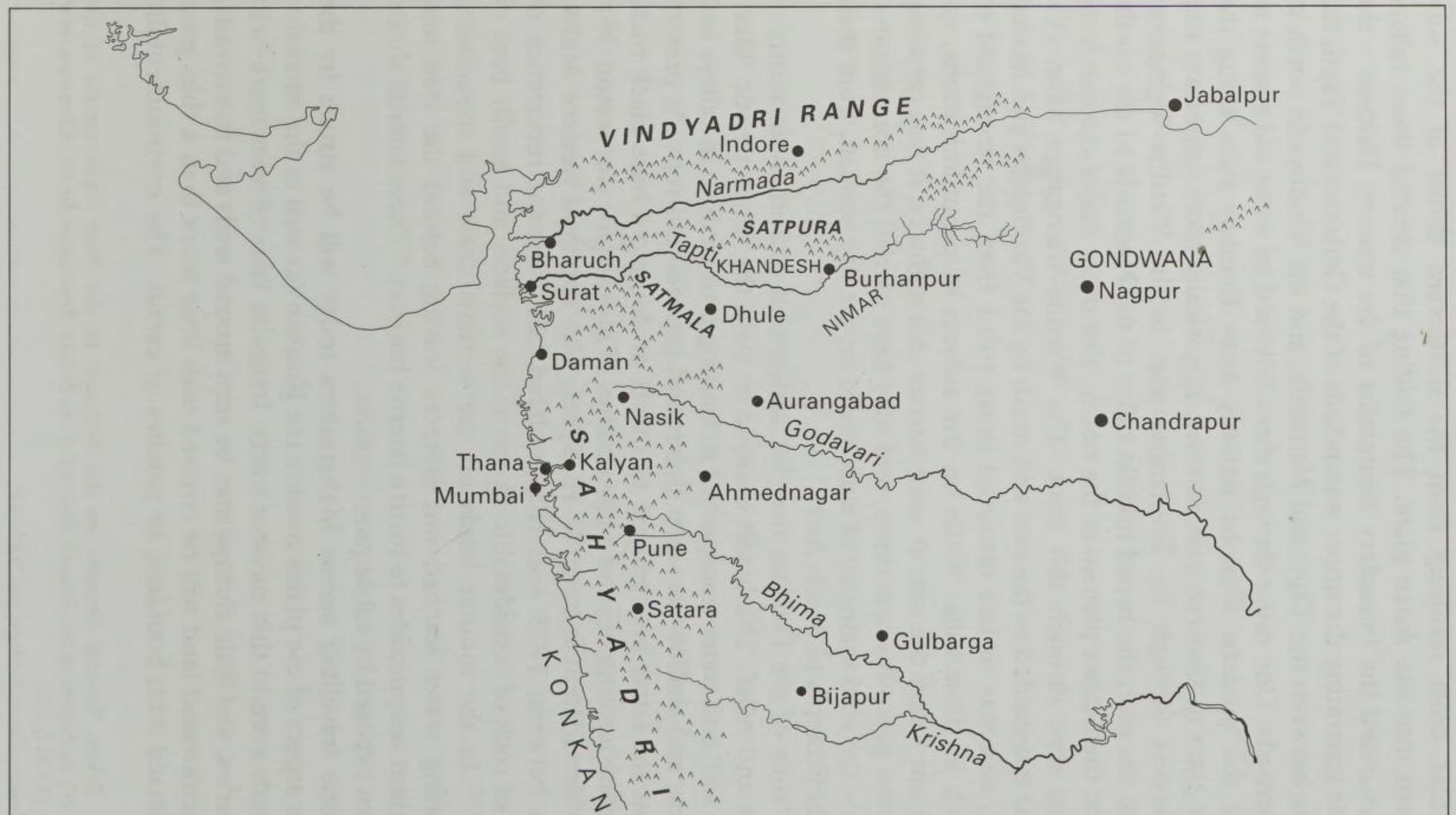
peninsular crust resulting from the northward thrust of the sub-continent into the Asian plate. The folding that created these valleys also generated the boundary mountains of the western Dakhan – the Satmala separating the upper watersheds of the Godavari and Tapti, the Satpura between the Tapti and Narmada, and the Vindhyadri north of the Narmada. One route through them followed by some old traders as well as the modern Western Railway from Bombay runs along the coastal plain to Gujarat, and another, historically more important one gives access through the Burhanpur gap, to the Wardha-Wainganga basin to the east, the broad middle valley of the Narmada to the north-east and the Malwa plateau to the north. The other major rail line from Bombay runs through this tract. The Wardha-Wainganga basin (Vidarbha) is bounded to the east and north by the Vindhyadri and Maikal ranges, and was in late medieval times ruled from the stronghold of Deogarh in those hills. While on the subject of communications, we should not forget the sea: at once barrier and highway, it was certainly used from proto-historic times, and may have carried the domesticated millets – the vital mainstay of agriculture on the dry plateau, from their home in Ethiopia to South Asia.

The soils of the Dakhan may be understood essentially in terms of climate and relief. The basalt decayed to yield the characteristic 'black cotton soil' and water transported it, causing it to lie deep in valleys and flat areas and shallow on steep slopes and exposed hill-tops. At present many of the latter are reduced to sheets or domes of bare black rock, supporting nothing beyond a few patches of moss in the wet season. Not all this denudation is new: W. H. Sykes, who surveyed western Maharashtra between 1825 and 1829 noticed 'the constant recurrence of sheets of rock of considerable extent at the surface, and totally bare of soil ...'[3] In the moister lands on the western coast and mountains, percolating water leached out silicates leaving behind the iron and aluminium sesquioxides to form a laterite horizon.[4] These laterite sheets are often exposed by subsequent erosion.

Anyone travelling across Maharashtra today will be struck by the treeless aspect of the plains outside the Konkan (as well as the extensive grasslands even in that moister tract). Irregular lines of trees mark field boundaries, and little clumps may be seen around wells and farmsteads, but uncultivated land will be covered with little more than a thin grass interspersed with boulders, or patches of cactus. The environmentally

[3] W. H. Sykes, 'Special Reports on the Statistics of the Four Collectorates of the Dukhun', in *Reports of the Seventh Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (1837), 226.

[4] Puri, *Indian Forest Ecology*, pp. 535–42.



Map 2 Western India: regional

aware traveller may see this as evidence of human interference, and experts tend to agree. 'The consensus of opinion among ecologists is that, but for the lopping, shifting cultivation, burning and grazing practiced through the ages in the forests, there would probably be no grasslands as such in India.'[5] Left to itself, forest scientists suggest, the western coastal region would be covered with tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen forests and most of the western and central plateau with moist or dry tropical deciduous or tropical thorn forest.[6] The actions of humans and their domesticates have significantly altered this picture, and much of the peninsula been transformed into open grassland savanna. This process was far advanced by the beginning of the nineteenth century when Sykes was commissioned to survey the western plateau for the government of Bombay. His manuscript reports frequently comment on the treelessness of the plains: for example:

> From 20 to 25 square miles of the Kurda Turruff lying in the fork formed by the junction of the Goreh and Beema rivers have scarcely half a dozen trees standing within their area, and those are of the Neemb /Melia Azadirachta/ kind found at Gunnehgaon ... At the junction I had occasion for a ridgepole and within 4 miles around a suitable stick was not procurable.[7]

This was near Dhond, about seventy kilometres east of Pune. Of the western plateau as a whole, he wrote

> Woods exist only in the ghauts, in belts on the slopes of the mountains, or in chasms or deep ravines. They are for the most part made up of medium-sized trees or large shrubs ... for extended purposes, the country reported on absolutely does not produce timber.

Xerophytic Euphorbium species also had proliferated on the rocky slopes of the hills, perhaps replacing grasses and shrubs eaten down by cattle. In places, they stood 'so thickly as to constitute a jungle'.

Water-courses, large and small, dissected the plains, and villages were typically located close to them, and often invisible from the table-land above. In the dry months of April and May, Sykes wrote, 'the country appears an arid desert. After the monsoon however, from the major part of the table land admitting of being sown with several species of Joaree [sorghum] ... the country appears one great field of grain ...'[8] Since the the millets provided both grain and fodder, we may view this as a transformation from a thorn forest to a seasonal grassland, stocked with species suited to the needs of *homo sapiens* and *bos indicus*. The latter

[5] P. M. Dabadghao and K. A. Shankarnarayan, *The Grass Cover of India* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Agricultural Research, 1973), p. 42.
[6] K. P. Sagreiya (rev. S. S. Negi), *Forests and Forestry* 5th edn (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1994), pp. 62–5.
[7] OIOC Mss Eur D. 141, p. 74.
[8] OIOC Mss Eur D. 148, in order of citation pp. 19, 6–7, 24.

may initially have been herded for meat and other products, but soon became the major energy source for agriculture and transport in proto-historic and historic India. However, the forage needs of an adequate cattle population frequently could not be sustained from local resources, and cattle had to be sent away to graze elsewhere. So for instance, a number of the Deccan Chalcolithic (2nd millennium BCE) sites have been identified as '"herding units" occupied seasonally by a small group of people for grazing their flocks.'[9] *Bos indicus* has been found at practically every Holocene habitation site in South Asia, and has been herded on a large scale for at least four millennia.[10] Fire would be the major instrument which these herders could deploy to modify the landscape, and it was probably used by hunters well before them.

Particular areas may have suffered significant degradation even in early historic times, this is suggested (for instance) at Bhagimohari in Nagpur district, a site occupied between *c.* 750 and 450 BCE.[11] The practice continued – an Asokan inscription warns that forests 'must not be burnt either uselessly or in order to destroy living beings'.[12] The exhortation had little effect – the *Gatha-Saptasati*, a verse anthology compiled in the Dakhan around the middle of the first millennium CE, refers to the monsoon clouds floating over the fire-blackened slopes of the Vindhya. Another verse describes antelopes trapped by hunting fires in a vast forest.[13] Repeated firing tends to suppress tree growth and allow grassland to develop, and burning the previous season's stubble encourages new growth during the wet season. The major ICAR study of Indian grasslands found that

> [f]ire is the chief factor which keeps many former forest tracts in the condition of savannahs and grasslands. Only a few tree species can withstand repeated fire damage and even these may be killed out in years of severe drought. Perennial fibrous unpalatable grasses are then able to become established and flourish ... with burning alone or in combination with the insignificant grazing of wild animals only, a type of tall grassland is the usual result. When cattle grazing is combined with burning to produce fresh edible shoots of the tall fibrous grasses, the rhizomes may be killed out and the grassland assumes a depauperate form.[14]

[9] V. Shinde, 'The Deccan Chalcolithic: A Recent Perspective', *Man and Environment*, 19, 1–2 (1994), 170.

[10] P. K. Thomas and P. P. Joglekar, 'Holocene Faunal Studies in India', *Man and Environment*, 19, 1–2 (1994), 179–203.

[11] P. K. Thomas, 'Faunal Remains from the Megalithic Habitation Site at Bhagimohari, Vidarbha, Maharashtra' *Man and Environment*, 18, 3 (1993), 116.

[12] D. C. Sircar (trans. and ed.), *Inscriptions of Asoka*, p. 71.

[13] R. G. Basak (ed. and trans.), *The Prakrit Gatha-Saptasati* (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1971), pp. 27, 129.

[14] Dabadghao and Shankarnarayan, *Grass Cover of India*, p. 55.

Wild animal populations could not remain unaffected by this widespread human activity, and species adapted to open savanna seem to have been abundant. Thus Thevenot, who travelled from Surat to Aurangabad in 1666–7 recorded that there were 'vast numbers of Antelopes, Hairs and Partridges, here and there in that Country; and towards the Mountains *Merous* or wild cows . . .'[15] The wild cow may refer to the woodland-dwelling *nilgai* and the antelope is probably blackbuck. The geographical distribution of different species is indicated by Bhimsen, who noted in 1663–64 that when Prince Muazzam hunted to the east of Aurangabad the bag would be deer and partridge, while neelgai were hunted to the west, in the (still forested?) hills near Fort Lohgarh. Tigers were found in the gorges and woodland of the now almost denuded Ellora hills. Needless to say, all of these creatures would, given the opportunity, raid crops and livestock, and there would be a keen demand for hunters and watchmen to protect the latter.

However, while humans and their domesticates were ubiquitous in our region during historic times, they were both less numerous and more mobile than in the current century. They would tend therefore to interfere with seral succession in a random and irregular fashion rather than maintain a steady overwhelming pressure on the landscape in the way that contemporary communities tend to do. Lands might service a regional town (or even a royal capital), be intensively used for decades and then abandoned altogether, often as a result of political upheaval. So for example, the Mughal official Bhimsen recorded that large areas of the plains of Tamilnadu lay untilled at the end of the seventeenth century as a consequence of the war between the Mughals and Marathas, so that the road from Sedam(?) to Tiruchirapalli ran for 60 *kos* or 200 kilometres through dense thorny jungle; hence the Imperial army besieging Gingee had to draw its supplies by sea from Bengal.[16] In Central India the periodic retreats of the sown were visible down to the late nineteenth century. In 1821 Ashta-Khatoda was an important town in Chandrapur district, and headquarters of a sub-division. However, only 31 out of the latter's 143 villages were inhabited. By 1869 even Khatoda had been abandoned, being reduced to 'a cluster of Gond huts in a wide forest. For a considerable distance round Khatora are reaches of grass unbroken by trees, showing where cultivated ground existed at no remote period . . .'[17]

This mobility characterised north India as well. Writing at the begin-

[15] S. N. Sen (ed.), *The Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri* (New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1949), p. 102.
[16] Bhimsen, *Tarikh-i-Dilkasha*, pp. 192–5.
[17] OIOC Mss Mar D. 44, fos.83a-b; *C. P. Gazetteer*, p. 245.

ning of the sixteenth century, the Mughal emperor Babur had already noted that

> [i]n Hindustan hamlets and villages, towns indeed, are depopulated and set up in a moment! If the people of a large town, one inhabited for years even, flee from it, they do it in such a way that not a sign or a trace of them remains in a day or a day and a half. On the other hand, if they fix their eyes upon a place in which to settle, they need not dig water-courses, or construct dams because their crops are all rain-grown . . .

He also noted that there were extensive thorn forests in many parts of the plains, which sheltered peasants resisting the tax-collectors.[18]

The vegetation that occupied abandoned land would vary considerably, depending on the moisture available and the extent of soil erosion during the period of human occupation. Wet regions near the western coast might see a modified secondary forest come up within a few decades: however, the continued extraction of the taller timber trees would promote the growth of dense thickets of smaller trees and shrubs. An early forest official described how, in the vicinity of Goa 'the larger forest trees of the country had been ordered to be cut to an unlimited extent from 1820'; the result was 'one mass of matted bush, exceedingly difficult to penetrate, and affording abundant cover for any marauders . . .'[19] By contrast, on the drier parts of the plateau savannah, euphorbium scrub or thin thorn forest might persist for long periods. Most of the terrain described by W. H. Sykes in the 1820s would seem to have been checked in stage 2 or stage 3 of Burns' six-stage succession model for Dakhan grasslands.[20] Thus when modern Dharwar district was surveyed by Marshall in 1820–22 the large area of land that had lain uncultivated for three decades past was covered with 'strong bushes and small trees of the Mimosa and Acacia family . . .'[21] Moister terrain such as Khandesh and Vidarbha would be covered with dense woodland in a relatively shorter period of time. Even here, in 1870 the provincial *Gazetteer* noted that the bulk of the nearly 77,000 square miles (198,000 sq. km.) of uncultivated land was 'covered by scrub jungle, which though often rich in wild fruit and other forest produce, supplies

[18] *Babur Nama* (*Memoirs of Babur*), trans. Annette S. Beveridge (repr. Delhi: Oriental Books, 1970), p. 488.

[19] Forest Report for 1849–50, p. 6 in *Forest Reports of the Bombay Presidency 1849–50 to 1855–56.*

[20] Stage 2 – 'very few xerophytic bushes and shrubs come in'. Stage 3 – average height of bushes 'goes up to 12 feet'. Climax stage 6 – 'With the closing of tree canopy of the mixed deciduous trees with a general height of 30–59 feet . . . shrubs have generally disappeared. Bushes are generally suppressed.' Puri, *Indian Forest Ecology*, I, p. 296.

[21] Thomas Marshall, *Statistical Reports on the Pergunnahs . . . in the Southern Maratha Country* (Bombay: Gazette Press, 1822), pp. 180–1.

little wood of value for purposes of construction.'[22] In areas where grazing pressure was, or had been heavy, the successor woodland would be dominated by thorny, quick-growing trees of the *zyziphus* and *acacia* type. We find a Maratha official arranging for the cutting away of such trees (*babhal* and *ber*) during an attempt to resettle northern Maharashtra in 1814–15. Thorny vegetation continued to dominate the area as evidenced by a description of Khandesh in 1851, after cultivation had expanded much beyond its early nineteenth century low :

> On entering the Province from almost any quarter, the face of the country appears to be covered with low, scattered bush jungle. This jungle is composed of various kinds of thorny bushes, of which the 'Bear' with its recurved thorns is the most abundant. These bushes are seldom more than 10 feet in height, and usually much less. They do not generally grow very close together, but here and there dense and almost impervious thickets are met with . . .[23]

Thickets would not only shelter human evildoers – they would also harbour deer and antelope that raided the common cereals, wild pig and jackal that attacked valuable products like grapes and sugarcane, and wolves, panthers and leopards that preyed on men and cattle.[24] Tigers could often seriously impede settlement and clearance, and as late as 1867–68 a single tiger killed 135 persons in Chandrapur (Chanda) district.[25] The dense jungle which would often come up on the more fertile land also seems to have encouraged mosquito varieties that were particularly efficient vectors of malaria, to which locals would have some acquired immunity, but which would present a further barrier to outsiders, whether soldiers or settlers. Thus a small valley containing a number of villages which had been abandoned in the eighteenth century was sought to be colonised in the mid nineteenth. 'But the climate proved deadly in the extreme. The cultivators died, or lost their health irrecoverably from frequent attacks of jungle fever.'[26]

Large timber was rare in this anthropogenic woodland, and the ordinary peasants had learned to live without it. Bamboos, or the young poles of coppiced trees were adequate to support the roofs of their modest houses – only great men needed large beams and rafters. These could prove difficult to procure: in 1730 the Peshwa was building a palace at Pune and wrote to the officer in charge that he would occupy it soon. The latter then wrote back to say that 'as the Lord well knows' there was no timber in the province; it had to be brought from the

[22] *C. P. Gazetteer*, p. xxii.
[23] SRBG 1 (O.S.): Report by Captain Wingate on the Plan of Survey and Assessment . . . Khandesh, pp. 2, 3.
[24] Wingate, ibid., p. 5 and Sykes, *Special Report*, p. 248.
[25] *C. P. Gazetteer*, p. xxii.
[26] SRBG 1 (O.S.): Wingate, ibid., p. 5.

western mountains and this would take time.[27] The timber scarcity described by Sykes (1829) was evidently at least a century old. The same shortage beset the Nagpur kingdom as well; among the merchandise imported into its capital around 1810 was teak wood from the forests of Lanji and Khairagadh which were over 150 kilometres distant.[28] The plains of northern Karnatak were equally short of timber in 1820 – wood cut into beams twelve feet long and six inches square was imported by the bullock-load from 'the country S. W. of Dharwar . . .'[29] Thus great men everywhere depended on distant woodlands for their timber needs.

So it is evident that the premodern landscape of the Peninsula presented a varied mosaic of tillage, pasture and woodland in various seral stages, supporting a diverse population of plants and animals, and offering various opportunities to that most adaptable of all beasts, *homo sapiens*. The next section of this chapter will review these opportunities.

Opportunities and communities

At the end of the twentieth century over 150 million hectares or nearly half the surface area of the Republic of India is under cultivation, and another 19 per cent classified as forest; actual forest cover amounts to only 13 to 14 per cent of the total area. Woodlands therefore exist as islands in a sea of tillage, degraded pasture and barren waste; two centuries earlier the picture might have been reversed – archipelagoes of tillage were found in a sea of modified woodland and open savannah.

Like all islanders, the inhabitants of these archipelagoes drew much from the sea around them: timbers, bamboos and poles for crafts and construction, wood for implements, reeds for screens and baskets, branches and brushwood for fencing and fuel, wild fruits and animals for food, grazing for their animals, and a variety of other products. In many areas they had also modified the woodland by protecting trees of value to them, as, for instance, *mahua* throughout Central India. Many of the poorer villagers also subsisted on wild fruits and roots during the hungry season before the first autumn harvest.[30] Others sustained themselves by the sale of various forest products.

Forest communities could provide or obstruct such vital supplies, and also provide a variety of services, including protection from animals, demons and themselves. All of the above were being provided by analogous peoples in the nineteenth century: crop-stealing and crop-watching, trading and raiding, swidden and sorcery may be seen as

[27] *SPD*, 30, p. 50. [28] OIOC Mss Mar D. 31, fo.64.
[29] Marshall, *Reports*, pp. 180–1. [30] Ibid., p. 17.

elements in the repertoire of techniques of those who straddled the boundaries between the wild and the sown. In the 1820s and 1830s, Alexander Mackintosh, an experienced police officer, described the Katkari of the northern Konkan, a forest tribe that specialised in extracting catechu and making charcoal. In the off-season they camped near peasant villages, selling wood and grass, and working as labourers in the paddy fields.

> They have the credit of being great robbers, stealing corn from the cultivators' fields and farmyards, also of committing robberies in the villages by night and plundering solitary travellers during the day. Notwithstanding these vexatious doings, the inhabitants live in such a state of terror of them, owing to their believing the Kattouries to be the greatest magicians and enchanters in the country, that they dread the idea of accusing them openly of the robberies they commit, and most commonly all they do, is to ask the Kattoury Naik to prevent his people molesting the property of the villagers.[31]

Unfortunately for the Katkaris, they could not cast the same spell over the colonial forest officials and landlords who arrived in the later nineteenth century, and they were reduced to an impoverished rural proletariat by these new-comers.[32]

Further east, in present-day Madhya Pradesh, the Baiga were another forest community with a useful sideline in magic and healing. In 1939, Verrier Elwin described their complete integration into a regional division of labour:

> modern Baiga hardly make anything for themselves. Their cloth is woven by Mehera and Panka, their shoes and sandals are made by the Chamar, their pots by the Kumbhar, their arrow-heads and axes by the Agaria. The Bania provides them with their ornaments, the Badnin comes to do their tattooing; even the basket-work which has been their speciality for centuries is now being taken from them by the Basor who lay claim to a caste monopoly.[33]

Elwin believed that the Baiga had until recent times been self-contained and self-sufficient; but there is evidence to suggest that this had not been the case even at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1820–21, while British suzerainty was being established in central India, Richard Jenkins, the *de facto* governor of Nagpur, despatched a trusted employee, Vinayakrao, on an ethnological tour of the area. The latter found the name Baiga used by magicians and astrologers over a wide area – so Ganguti, of the Ganda caste, informed him at Balod, a town 300 kilometres south of the Baiga area of concentration in Mandla, that their

[31] A. Mackintosh, 'A Short Account of the Kattouries or Kathkuries Residing in the Koncan and Attaveesy', *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society from 1836 to 1838*', I, pp. 328–9.
[32] This is more fully discussed in chapter 8.
[33] V. Elwin, *The Baiga* (1939; repr. Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1986), p. xxvii.

'Joshis were Gonds termed Baiga' and they fixed the auspicious days for marriages. In many villages, Baiga acted as 'Bhumaks', worshippers of the local gods, and received dues from the cultivators.[34] When and how they established themselves in this role is not clear but it is quite possible that their spread from their area of concentration in Mandla was a consequence of the spread of Gond power in central India from the fifteenth century onward. The Gond chiefs, it may be supposed brought their ritual specialists in their train. The structured division of labour described by Elwin would, as I have suggested in chapter 1, have characterised South Asia from fairly remote times.

Such specialised roles could not support entire communities, and most people depended on multiple activities to sustain themselves. This is evident, for instance, from a description of the Bhils of Khandesh around 1850, given by their British supervisor:

> those of the tribe who are neither in the employ of Government, nor village servants, procure a livelihood for themselves and their families by cultivating the soil; cutting and selling grass, firewood and timber; gathering and selling jungle fruits, roots, herbs, gums, honey &c.; and, during the harvest season by watching Ryuts' [farmers'] grain-fields, reaping crops, &c.; while some of them take permanent service with the Ryuts as ploughmen, and others spend part of their time in killing wild animals for the sake of the reward given by Government, – a pursuit which, while it affords a subsistence to such as follow it, benefits Government and the Ryuts, by preventing beasts of prey from overrunning the country.[35]

A similar multiplicity of occupations was recorded among the Katkari of the Konkan by A. N. Weling in the 1930s. He observed that the Katkari had many occupations 'being a hunter, a coal maker, and a gatherer and seller of forest produce, he is an agriculturist, a field labourer and fresh water fisherman'. N. G. Chapekar also gives the seasonal distribution and earnings of these employments.[36]

The only social scientist to have attempted the analysis of these community specialisations and interactions in environmental terms has been Madhav Gadgil. In his view caste communities can, historically, be seen as analogous to biological species in drawing upon a specified set of resources in limited ranges ('niches'). The hereditary social division of labour ensured that the biological descendants of each such group would continue to control a given resource, and this in turn created a rationale for the prudent exploitation of that resource. Colonial rule

[34] OIOC Mss Mar D. 46, fos.55b, 61a. Joshi is a common Brahman surname, and a corruption of *jyotishi* (astrologer).
[35] J. Rose, 'Continuation of the Foregoing Memoir', pp. 224–5 in SRBG 26 (N.S.).
[36] Weling, *The Katkaris*, p. 5; N. G. Chapekar, *Badlapur* (Pune: the author, 1933), pp. 130–1.

broke down this isolation, and, by introducing the pull of the global market, exposed various resources to overexploitation. This pioneering effort however, rests on shaky historical foundations.[37] Community locations were far from fixed in the early medieval era, and we have already seen how climatic or political stress could lead to the desertion of some 'niches' and intrusion (immigration) into others. Apart from mass migrations, Gadgil's assumption that one caste exploited one resource in one location over many generations did not hold even in 'normal' times – as may be seen, for example in the description of the means of livelihood of the Khandesh Bhils or the Konkan Katkaris cited above.

It should equally be emphasised that such groups shared these resources with others in the vicinity, and did not have exclusive access. Thus a witness before the Bombay Forest Commission of 1885 described the situation in Dhak forest, Thana district:

> The people of about twenty-five or twenty-six villages take grass and firewood, *rab, karvand* Carissa Carandas berries, mangoes, soap-nuts, and other fruits from the Dhak forests. Except Katkaris, people take these things from the forests for their own use only, not for sale.[38]

It must be evident that Gadgil's model breaks down at every point; small endogamous groups did not occupy the same location for long periods of time, and even when they did, they had lacked exclusive access to particular resources. The human species is too opportunistic and too versatile to be confined to particular niches for centuries on end.

The political economy of community interaction

None the less, a complex political economy did exist, and (as we saw) even apparently isolated groups such as the Baiga participated in it, by specialising in some role. Inevitably, many of these specialists would come to depend for their very livelihood on interaction with the agrarian order. Certainly by the late eighteenth century many of them, and especially those aspiring to political dominance, depended vitally upon tribute and exchange with the settled peasants. (Indeed, dominance in medieval India meant the ability to extract tribute from others.) John Malcolm wrote of the Bhils of the Malwa hills that they were

> dependent on the neighbouring villages, in the plain, for tobacco, of which, as well as liquor, they are immoderately fond. They also require grain, for they

[37] M. Gadgil and R. Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 106.

[38] *Report of the Bombay Forest Commission*, 4 vols. (Bombay Government, 1887), II, p. 7.

cultivate little ... They often possess cattle, and, when at peace with the inhabitants of the plain, they breed fowls in great numbers, the sale of which is source of profit.[39]

The same was true further south. A late eighteenth-century letter from Gunajirao Yadav, a beleaguered Maratha officer in Thana district reports that the Bhils had closed the mountain passes, were plundering the villages and had blockaded him in Dehre fort. He asked for reinforcements, but also repeatedly urged the importance of seeing that none of the villages sheltered the Bhils or supplied them with grain: 'the revenue officers and headmen should be issued stern warnings that if they are discovered sheltering the Bhils or giving them grain etc., then the headman will be punished and his patrimony confiscated.'[40] The same strategic observation was made in Khandesh by its first British administrator, John Briggs, who reported that the chiefs of the Satpura hills were made to submit 'by our cutting off their provisions'.[41] This, it must be emphasised, was not due to population growth and the inability of the forests to support their residents: Malcolm in 1820 calculated density in the Vindhya at only six per square mile.[42] Swidden could easily have sustained a population of that size. Interaction should be seen as an adaptation, a consciously chosen strategy, to draw on the resources of the open country through exchange as well as sustainable robbery (tribute/customs) and large-scale robbery (war). For the Bhils of southern Rajasthan, the tolls they collected were a vital resource – an early nineteenth-century observer commented that 'in bad seasons it appears to be almost the only means the Bheels have of supporting themselves without plunder ...'[43]

Forest communities would be at an advantage because of their familiarity with the woodlands, and the possibility of flight into them, evading the ponderous retribution of lords of the land. The ability to disrupt agriculture and trade was the major sanction the forest peoples could deploy, and agrarian gentry were well aware of it. For example, when an insurrection broke out in the hills of western Satara in 1818, local Brahman officials warned the British that the insurgents might 'overrun and destroy the country during the Monsoon, and effectually

[39] John Malcolm, 'Essay on the Bhills', *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1 (1830), 88–9.

[40] PA Sanika Rumal 23, Pudke 5, doc.13667. The letter is dated 14 Shaval, but no year is given.

[41] John Briggs, Rept. of 31 Oct. 1821 in *Selections from the Records at the East India House*, 4 vols. (London: The East India Company, 1820–26), IV, p. 349.

[42] Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, I, p. 223.

[43] *Papers Relative to the Meywar Bheel Corps under the Command of Major Wm. Hunter* (London: The East India Company, 1856), p. 14.

stop the Cultivation, depopulate the Villages and ruin the Revenues . . .'[44] This would not have been a novel strategy, nor one confined to the Ramoshi insurgents. In fact, it was the standard strategy adopted by local chiefs and princes when faced by superior military power. The Portuguese of Damao saw it in operation in the sixteenth century. The Raja of Sarzeta who 'claimed with certitude to be the original lord' was defeated by the kings of Cambay, and forced to retire to the hills and forests, from where he and his successors carried on a war of robbery and plunder and thus prevented the territory from yielding the usual revenues.[45]

The use of the forest as a base and its inhabitants as allies by dispossessed elites or aspirant rulers was a familiar idea in the literature of the first millennium CE, being ascribed to rulers as far apart as Ugrasena Nanda of Magadha and Vanaraja, the legendary founder of the kingdom of Anhilvada in Gujarat.[46] Aspirant forest chiefs might adopt Rajput or other titles, and set up petty courts borrowing as much of the panoply of the surrounding regimes as they could afford, and (if successful) ultimately established little kingdoms that had disowned their jungle origins.[47] So marauders of the forest could become Rajput chieftains. Thus (for example) according to a nineteenth century British record the little princedom of Abhoni in Khandesh established by two Rajput brothers, who

> came from Jypur and enlisted with a number of followers in the service of the Imperial Amil of Galna. They were so useful in suppressing the insurrections of the Bhils and Mowassias [refractory folk] in Baglana, that the Emperor granted them 19 inam [tax-free] villages . . .[48]

The contemporary observer, Bhimsen, provides a less romantic account of the origin of this chiefdom, whose founder appears to have been an unusually successful fence:

> The ruined village of Abhona was colonised by a Maratha named Ragho, who had formerly served under the Mughal faujdar [commandant] of Nasik, and had

[44] Letter of Grant Duff to M. Elphinstone 14 June 1818 in OIOC Mss Eur D471, p. 108.

[45] A. Lobato, *Relacoes Luso-maratas 1658–1737* (Lisboa: Centro de Estudios Historicos Ultramar, 1965), document cited in n.1 p. 22.

[46] *Prabandhachintamani or Wishingstone of Narratives composed by Merutunga Acharya* trans. C. H. Tawney (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1899), pp. 15–18 for Vanaraja; R. K. Mookerji, *Chandragupta Maurya and His Times* (University of Madras, 1943), p. 31 for Ugrasena.

[47] The classic account of this process is Surajit Sinha, 'The Rajput Myth in Central India'(1962), reprinted in Hermann Kulke ed. *The State in India 1000–1700* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[48] G. W. Forrest (ed.), *Selections from the Letters, Despatches and Other Papers preserved in the Bombay Secretariat – Maratha Series* I, Pt. 3, p. 697. This record was compiled *c.* 1825.

afterwards taken to robbery. He used to bring his plunder from the surrounding country and lodge it here, and traders used to buy and sell these articles. As Ragho was on friendly terms with all men, none hindered him![49]

Ragho's successors continued in this line of business, and proved sufficiently troublesome to be paid the sum of thirty thousand rupees in 1730. But in 1732 Dalpatrao Toke (of Abhoni) was plundering again, so much so that the little town of Patne had to hire 150 soldiers to protect itself from his demands. In retaliation he destroyed the sugarcane crop, and prevented the planting of the rice.[50] The Tokes continued these activities in the troubled decades before the fall of the Peshwa as well, [51] but blossomed forth into ancient Rajput defenders of law and order for the benefit of the British – a transformation more often achieved than recorded. Political failure could equally return them to their source; a mid nineteenth-century British account wrote of one such ruler: 'The Raja of Dhurumpoor is by descent a Rajpoot, though now almost reduced to the condition of a Bheel Chief.'[52]

On the other hand, in almost every part of India, climatic fluctuation accompanied by war and turmoil periodically strained the agrarian order to point of collapse, settled agriculture retreated before the advancing forest and savanna, and surviving humans shifted to other forms of subsistence, which some of them had never abandoned. Down to the late nineteenth century, emigration and flight were standard responses to the proverbial calamities inflicted by the kings and by the heavens (*asmani wa sultani*).

Forest wanderers, graziers and traders

Where could these refugees flee but into the woodland around them? They might then seek shelter in the grazing encampments where their cattle had seasonally gone to take advantage the monsoon herbage. If the time of troubles was prolonged then the surviving refugees might well take to swidden husbandry in the forest or turn into pastoral nomads themselves. Owen Lattimore has cogently suggested that pastoral nomadism as a way of life had its origins in desertions from mixed farming communities under the impact of both natural and social

[49] Jadunath Sarkar *History of Aurangzib*, V, pp. 238–9; Raghu and his brother, Kaka Mansabdar also appear in the contemporary letters of the Mughal official Matabar Khan, in Setu Madhavrao Pagdi (ed. and trans.), *Studies in Maratha History – volume II* (Kolhapur: Shivaji University, 1971), II, pp. 23, 25, 51, 52.

[50] *SPD*, 30, pp. 301, 67–8.

[51] See the report of the activities of Chhatrasingh Toke in *Historical Selections from the Baroda State Records*, 5 vols. (Baroda State Press, 1935–39), V, pp. 791–2.

[52] SRBG (N.S.), No.26: *Miscellaneous Information connected with the Petty States*, p. 34.

change.[53] The nomads' subsequent relations with settled folk might install them as lords of the sown, perhaps governing the resettlement of lands that their initial depredations had depopulated. Mate has noted a hiatus in the urban archaeological record at a majority of sites in western India between the fifth and twelfth centuries CE, and it may be significant that the later centuries of this period see various dynasties whose names associate them with pastoralism (Palas, Yadavas, Gurjaras) come into prominence in various parts of India. This period also sees the extension of an era (Kalachuri – commencing 248–9 CE) early associated with an Abhira chief.[54] Now, the Abhiras appear in the *Amarakosha* classified with keepers of cows and buffaloes, and are characterised as very low (*mahashudra*); the Ramayana depicts them as ferocious marauders.[55] Both these texts may reflect the time of troubles in the middle centuries of the first millennium C.E. when pastoralists were violently renegotiating their relations with the settled villages and their Brahman parasites. The above-named dynasties may subsequently have been created by the upper strata among the pastoralists settling to rule over a renewed agrarian system, and this may then account for the use of the Abhira era through much of Central India in the first millennium. P. M. Chandorkar, using both literary and epigraphic sources has argued that the modern Ahirs and Gavlis – until recently cattle-keepers – should be identified with the Yadavas and Abhiras of the classical Sanskrit texts. He also notes that Khandesh, on the margin of the central Indian forests, was earlier known as the land of the Ahirs, and the local Marathi dialect continued to be called Ahirani.[56]

Kingship would, of course, be available to only a few, and the remaining pastoralists would gradually integrate themselves into the renewed agrarian political and natural environment. In the semi-arid and arid tracts that occupy the greatest part of the Indian sub-continent, herdsmen would have to move from monsoon grazing on the seasonal grasses of the open lands to (or through) the foliage and herbage of the forest tracts. Some pastoralists, like the Banjaras, might cover long distances in their migrations, and become traders, traversing both forest and sown – in the mid nineteenth century they were described as 'a curious race of nomads who are found everywhere in Central India,

[53] Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, p. 408; see also A. M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 117.

[54] V. V. Mirashi, 'Introduction' to *Inscriptions of the Kalachuri-Chedi Era – Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, IV, Pt.1 (Ootacamund, Govt. Epigraphist, 1955).

[55] A. Loiseleur Deslongchamps, *Amarakocha ou Vocabulaire D'Amarasimha* (repr. Osnabruck: Biblio Verlag, 1988), p. 128; Ramkumar Rai, *Valmikiramayanakosha* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1965), p. 34.

[56] P. M. Chandorkar, 'Khandesh va Khandeshi bhasha', *BISMT*, 7 (1926), 136–214.

acting as carriers with herds of pack bullocks.'[57] Other groups, perhaps due to loss of their livestock, could take up permanent abode in the woodlands; so in the early nineteenth century the Thakurs, cultivators of the Sahyadri mountains were closely associated with the wandering Gavli herdsmen, and shared a common deity in 'Pishunatha' – lord of beasts.[58] Others continued to wander, sometimes gaining a reputation as soldiers and/or robbers. The sixteenth-century Mughal compendium, the *Ain-i-Akbari* classified both the Banjaras and another pastoral community of the Dukhun, the Hatkar as 'Rajputs'. As late as the politically disturbed early years of the nineteenth century the chiefs of the shepherd folk, Bargi Hatkars, gained control of the country and (in the eye of central authority) 'became the breakers of the law and their men the dacoits of the country'. Many of them were executed out of hand by the British before they submitted and were 'settled'.[59] Such changes in the political environment might force militant pastoralists to concentrate exclusively on herding; from mid nineteenth-century Kolhapur, for example, a British official reported that many of the 'predatory tribes' now possessed 'considerable wealth in flocks and herds . . .'[60]

These transitions were embedded in the traditions of peninsular India. Many foundation legends recorded in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries recalled great famines, after which the lands had lain fallow, occupied by low people and wandering tribes, before being settled once again by the ancestors of the present holders thus refounding the settled agrarian order, whose task, by definition, was to thrust back the *jangal* and expel the *jangli*.[61] While individual dates may have been incorrect, the central motif of settlement and resettlement is certainly accurate. The makers of traditions knew that the struggle between *jangli* and *shetkari* (literally field-maker i.e., farmer) was a continuous one, and so a traditional account of the Karhada region of southern Maharashtra, compiled in 1751, began with the great twelve-year famine (1396–1408 CE) and the consequent retreat of cultivation:

> for twelve years famine fell upon the earth, the grazier folk rose everywhere, from that year until Shaka 1360 [CE 1438] . . . for thirty years the graziers ruled

[57] J. Forsyth, *The Highlands of Central India* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1889), p. 107–8n; he adds 'Their name means "Forest Wanderer", and they appear to be perfectly distinct both from Hindus and from the known aboriginal tribes.' Ibid. It actually derived from *banijara* – merchant. See Shyamsunderdas (ed.), *Kabir Gramthavali*, p. 162.

[58] Wilson, *Aboriginal Tribes*, pp. 20–1.

[59] A. C. Lyall (ed.), *Gazetteer for the Haidarabad Assigned Districts* (Bombay: Education Society Press, 1870), p. 201.

[60] SRBG 8 (N.S.), p. 163.

[61] 'Jangal' is the Hindustani root of the English 'jungle'; 'jangali' is 'man of the jungle.

– the kingdom is without control, so they believed. [Shaka] 1361 ... this year Adil Patshah of Bidar despatched Dado Narasinha and built the fort of Paranda, and so that there might be order and demarcation [*chakbandi*] of the land, the Padshah sent Black Khoja and White Khoja, [who] fixed districts and sub-divisions, boundaries and boundary marks. The land was measured according to the Adilshahi *bigha*, a hundred *bighas* made a *chahur*, on this basis the taxes were fixed...[62]

This was recognised to be a recurring process. When the notables of the area assembled at Saswad in order to settle a dispute over a hereditary office, the complainant, Gondji Garud explained how his ancestor had received the post when the sultan had sent Malik Naib and Shahabhai Khoje to resettle the desolated land in the early seventeenth century. They had summoned the *deshmukh* and *deshkulkarni* and the latter told them that herdsmen had set up camps all over the territory and should be called. The herdsmen presented themselves, and were offered hereditary rights if they settled down to tillage and made the land prosperous. Among these settlers were Gondji's ancestors Vithoji and Mahadji, who were issued a title-deed to the headmanship of Belsar after the boundaries of the village had been fixed.[63]

Ecological warfare: the clearing of the forest

Peripatetic herdsmen and forest folk both constituted a threat to the village-centred and rule-bound agrarian order that rajas and sultans sought to preserve and extend. So when the emperor Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagar (1509–1536) sought for an image to emphasise his apothegm that the king should be able to enforce his commands, his mind travelled to such lowly people, the natural enemies of royal order. He wrote: 'Even the Abhiras [herdsmen] and the Bhillas of the forest are able to enforce their orders ...' He also added that the destruction of their forest habitat was the only way to minimise the activities of 'robbers'. 'Increase the forests that are near your frontier fortresses (Gadi desa) and destroy all those which are in the middle of your territory. Then alone you will not have trouble from robbers!'[64]

This was a common and widespread strategic belief; jungle clearance had not merely symbolic but also instrumental value. Nor was this confined to the Brahmanical political tradition. A seventeenth-century Persian inscription from Gujarat recorded that a Mughal official made such successful efforts to subdue the rebel Haj that the latter came out

[62] K. V. Purandare (ed.), *Shivcharitra Sahitya* (Pune: BISM, 1926), I, p. 2.
[63] *BISMT*, 33–4, 3–4 & 1–2 (1952–3), 25.
[64] Saraswati (trans.), 'Political Maxims', p. 65.

of the forest in person 'with chopper and axe in hand for cutting the jungle'. The reader was presumed to understand that this willingness to destroy the basis of his own resistance indicated the total surrender of the insurgent.[65] In 1675, John Fryer, travelling through the Konkan in time of war, noted that the country folk fled into the woods to escape enslavement by the Mughal armies, but these forests were 'also set on fire, to leave them destitute of those recesses'.[66]

The same strategic logic governed later regimes – and we may see it vigorously applied by both Marathas and British in Central India, the antagonists in this case being the Bhils and cognate groups. The Maratha officials clearly saw the forest as an enemy and an obstacle. A review of the situation in Khandesh (*c.*1813) comments:

> There are many trees in this province; therefore the peasants are troubled by tigers and robbers, and human settlement cannot grow. Hence the revenue officers should be instructed to cut down trees within their districts and increase settlements.[67]

Nor were the forests merely an impediment to movement and surveillance – they also presented other dangers. Outsiders visiting the forests were prone to severe, and often fatal attacks of fever, as the British were to discover in their campaigns against the Bhils,[68] and the Peshwa's men posted to remote jungle outposts suffered in like fashion. The commandant of Kukarmunda, Janardhan Raghunath Sukhatme, sent Tipu Khan and his men to the outposts of Valheri and Kolvi, but the air was bad, the water did not suit them, they all fell ill, and

> the Bhils carried them back to the fort on cots. Some died, the rest were medicated and cured, and men from the fort garrison were sent to hold the posts. But the air does not suit them, they fall ill, therefore Tipu Khan's men refuse to go to the outposts, and no one from the other units is prepared to go either.[69]

The Bhils, it will be noted, were unaffected.

The long-term solution was to cut down the forest, and when

[65] Z. A. Desai, 'A Recently Discovered Inscription of Aurangzeb from Gujarat', in K. V. Ramesh et al. (eds.), *Indian History and Epigraphy: Dr G. S. Gai Felicitation Volume* (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1990), p. 22.

[66] John Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1909), I, p. 310.

[67] PA Sanika Rumal 26 Pudke 3 doc.14030.

[68] Of five officers who proceeded during August to the Mangrode jungles, three died within a fortnight of their return; and few descend to the Dang at any season of the year without suffering from fever. During a short campaign of three months, of five officers, one died and three left India on sick certificate; and of three hundred regulars who were employed, one hundred and twenty marched back to Malligaum. (D. C. Graham in SRBG 26 p. 211n)

[69] PA Sanika Rumal 28, Pudke 8 doc.15787.

Sukhatme first arrived to take charge of the abandoned fort of Kukarmunda he expended much effort in doing this. His activities in this regard appear in many reports, but may be illustrated by one quotation:

> Jiva Vasava [rebel Bhil] stays five or six *kos* [fifteen miles ?] west of this place. A dense jungle of *babhal* and *ber* has grown up in that direction, so I have deployed pioneers to improve the road. *Babhal* and *ber* have hard wood hence few are being cut daily; smaller thorny bushes and brushwood are cut to the number of three or four hundred. I am keeping a record of numbers cut. The road has been improved for two to two and a half *kos*, from the headquarters upto the village of Bane. News came that Jiva's Bhils and soldiers in his employ were planning to attack the wood-cutters and pioneers, so I set off at mid-day with my men. The Bhils had reached one *kos* from Bane; I proceeded through the trees and caught sight of them, but they did not show fight, and withdrew into the forest away from the road.

Clearing the forest had also reduced the danger from tigers, (he continues) so that men now went out in ones and twos. Other dangers persisted. To soldiers and officials from the open plain country the forest lands of north-western Khandesh were strange and demonic places. Illness or injury was immediately attributed to witchcraft – an explanation commonly advanced by the local inhabitants. So, for example, one report states that place was full of witches – five or ten of the pioneers and ten or twenty of the soldiers had suffered from them; however the witch was caught and punished, so the trouble had ended.[70]

As the forest was cleared and the road extended various refractory chiefs thought it prudent to come to terms. On both sides therefore there was a keen appreciation of how the forest itself supported certain forms of livelihood, including predation, that became less and less viable as it shrank.

On the other hand, social groups supporting themselves in such ways also contributed to the maintenance of the environment that was their major resource. Outlying fields, villages on the forest's edge, would be abandoned when the demands and reprisals of the Bhils, Kolis, Ramoshis or Gonds grew too heavy for the settled villages to sustain, and soon be overgrown by trees and bushes. In heavily grazed areas, these would be predominantly quick-growing thorny varieties, so that this secondary forest would be a greater obstacle to human movement and activity than the undegraded climax vegetation would have been.

Through the nineteenth century, however, the forests receded as trees went to feed demand for beams and rafters, for sleepers and firewood, and shrubs and brushwood were thinned out to fence fields and fuel hearths. This rapid thinning of the mountain forests would have been

[70] PA Sanika Rumal 26, Pudke 3 doc.13960.

accelerated by the fact that little large timber remained in the Dakhan plains – both because their low rainfall discouraged tree-growth and because of biotic pressure from men and animals. The process was encouraged by the British regime. Enlarging markets for their wood and other commodities was one of the strategies adopted by Malcolm in pacifying the Bhils of central India.[71] The idea of using forest folk to destroy the forests occurred to the other officials as well; as late as 1863 the Bombay government could be found ordering the employment of Bhils to cut down forests in order to 'improve the climate and attract settlers . . .'[72]

Subordinate communities and dominant communities

Forests were not solely inhabited by insurgents and marauders, even though they tend dominate the records generated by anxious officials, both indigenous and colonial. Many of the warriors who sallied forth in the dry season may have done so after harvesting some quick-ripening grain crop, or after clearing fields to be tended by their womenfolk. Furthermore, graziers, wood-cutters and swidden cultivators would all draw on the forest, and permanent villages exist within it. Times of peace would swell their numbers; times of trouble reduce them. At all times they had to come to terms with the more militant communities of the woodlands.

Unfortunately, this is a theme on which information is scarce: and what detailed knowledge we have dates from the turn of the nineteenth century. We catch a glimpse of the casual day-to-day exercise of power in the story of the forest-dweller and the peasant told by Krishnadevaraya of Vijaynagar. The former visited the latter and was promptly fed on rice and milk, but suspecting that he had been denied the meat cooking in another pot, resolved to murder his host. Only the accidental discovery that it was rope-fibre, and not flesh, in the second pot saved the peasant's life.[73] The evident inequality of the relationship did not have to be stated; the audience was presumed to understand it. Thus certain communities could well exercise the right to regular gifts in cash and kind from both settlers and transients – but these groups would have to develop a military ethos and reputation, both in order to maintain their claims as well as to keep out interlopers. Sometimes firm alliances would develop between a dominant forest community and the

[71] OIOC, Bombay Judicial Pros. (henceforth BJP) 20 Feb. 1828, P/400/15 No.6 'Minute' by John Malcolm.
[72] *Annual Report on the Administration of the Bombay Presidency* 1862–3, p. 93.
[73] Saraswati (trans.), 'Political Maxims', p. 67.

villages of the neighbourhood. In 1788, for example, the people of Siur, being at odds with the local administrator, were found to have lodged a party of insurgent Bhils in their town as a garrison. When the Peshwa's commander demanded their expulsion, the townsfolk refused, killed several of his men, and ultimately ensured the escape of most of the Bhils when the town was stormed.[74]

Other users of the forest and its fringes would learn to accommodate the locally dominant warriors. So, for example, when Marriott attempted to put down Koli guerillas who operated out of the forests in the northern Konkan, he found that the chief suppliers of food and information to the gangs were the itinerant graziers and cultivators of the Thakur community. Marriott, Collector in northern Konkan, described the situation in 1824

> The immense jungles into which the gangs retreat afford almost complete security to them ... Their agents, particularly for the ransom of their captives, are generally Tackoors or other Jungle tribes ... These persons are generally scattered through the forests, living in small companies, frequently consisting of not more than two or three Huts. They give information to the Gangs, and also occasionally find them food on their excursions ...[75]

Similarly, during the major Koli insurgency in 1845–46, W. J. Morris, magistrate and commander of the Bhil Corps reported that 'the whole of the Tackoor population about this area are bound by promise never to divulge any information about Ragoojee Baugria, this they have given out ...' Wounded insurgents also found hiding places among them.[76] Subordinated communities such as the Thakurs might well demilitarise themselves, so as to offer no provocation to the dominant. In the mid twentieth century, a sociologist was informed that the Thakurs were originally Rajputs, but now had a taboo against the horse. 'I was told that through terror of the Muslim kings the Thakurs discarded everything that savoured of martial activities, that is how the horse came to be tabooed.' The real source of their fears is suggested in the meditation on ethnic traits by Kamalu Padir, an elderly Thakur: 'The Koli is clean and brave. He is a dacoit and the Thakur is afraid of him.'[77] A kind of ethnic partitioning is evident in these descriptions, with one community clearly dominant over others.

Access to, and control of, women was an important marker of dominance, and in this also aspirant forest chiefs emulated the styles of

[74] *SSRPD*, VIII, 3, pp. 79–80.
[75] OIOC Board's Coll. Vol.1408 No.55606, p. 95.
[76] BJP 403/44 25 June 1845 No. 4548, rept. by W. J. Morris para.13; see no.4470 for report of concealment.
[77] L. N. Chapekar, *Thakurs of the Sahyadri* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 3, 158.

greater rulers, such as Raghuji II of Nagpur, who routinely had girls from various households, Brahman and non-Brahman, brought to him.[78] G. A. Rigby, Bhil Agent in the 1820s, reported that the various chiefs seized women either for their own use, or to bestow on their followers.[79] A tradition about this practice of the Bhil rajas was current among the Kokna peasants of the Dangs as late as 1960.[80] Mackintosh's account of the Ramoshis associated with Umaji Naik, who rose to local dominance in the 1820s, also noted that many of them kept women from the Maratha Kunbi or other theoretically higher castes.[81] Three Ramoshi naiks who attempted to establish their predominance in Ahmednagar district during the Anglo-Maratha war of 1803–6, not only dressed, bathed and worshipped 'after the fashion of the Brahmuns' but abducted and kept 'females of all castes in their houses'.[82] Similarly, the Muslim Rajput mercenaries employed to intimidate the Dubla labourers of a Surat village in the 1980s asserted their dominance by, among other things, the harassment of Dubla women.[83] Equally, punishing men of other communities who associated with women from one's own was a statement of dominance. This theme of community honour has been highlighted in Hardiman's study of the Kolis, but he does not appreciate its significance in the hierarchical ordering of communities.[84]

Once a particular group had an established dominance, others might find it expedient to operate under their franchise, so to speak. The knowledgeable Grant (later Grant Duff) reported from Satara in 1819:

> I do not think that there are above a thousand Rammoossees capable of bearing arms from the Neera to the Warna [rivers]; but the Mahrattas have always shown themselves very ready to join the Rammoossies in any disturbance when they were likely to obtain plunder, and the Rammoossies have become important in this part of the country only from that cause.[85]

Further north, in the Ahmadnagar district, W. H. Sykes found that the police charge of considerable areas was held by Bhil naiks, whose retinue, however, was composed Maratha and Muslim soldiers, with hardly a Bhil among them.[86] Evidently the Naiks were franchisee

[78] T. S. Shejwalkar (ed.), *Nagpur Affairs*, 2 vols. (Pune: Deccan College, 1954 and 1959), pp. 388–9.
[79] Letter of 27 Feb. 1824 in SRBG 23 (N.S.), p. 753.
[80] Census of India 1961 *Village Survey Monograph No. 7: Ghadvi, District Dangs*, p. 2.
[81] Mackintosh, 'Rammoossies', *Madras Journal* (July 1834), pp. 212, 216.
[82] Ibid., p. 240.
[83] J. Breman, *Wage Hunters and Gatherers* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 322–4.
[84] D. Hardiman, 'Community, Patriarchy, Honour: Raghu Bhanagre's Revolt', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 23 (1995), 111–17.
[85] *Selections . . . East India House*, IV, p. 237.
[86] OIOC Mss Eur D. 148, p. 99.

entrepreneurs, much of whose stock-in-trade was their tribe's reputation for ferocity.

Ethnic boundaries could come to mark both professional and class hierarchies: so, for example, in the nineteenth century, one subordinated group in the Dangs hill tract of Surat was labelled 'Kokna' – people from the Konkan; and indeed it is not impossible that refugees who fled into the forest might form the core of a nascent lower class in such polities. In the Dangs, subordinate peasants as a whole were labelled 'gavit' (villager) or 'kunbi' (peasant) – while the ethnonym 'Bhil' had acquired aristocratic connotations.[87]

'Beda, Berad, Bedar, Mushtigir': allegiances, professions, identities

Of course, it is important not to reify descriptive categories – something that both Brahmanical tradition, with its doctrines of *guna* (essential quality), and Western ethnography, with its inchoate but all-pervading sense of racial traits, were prone to do.[88] In reality, however, wanderers might settle, and the settled wander; forests might be cleared and forests grow – ploughshares be beaten into swords and vice versa. Identities would be subject to change and manipulation in the process, and this section will consider some examples of these processes at work.

It will be recollected that according to the tradition reported above, grazier folk overran Karhada after the great famine of 1396–1408. Another tradition of Karhada, recorded in 1655–56, also recalled the famine when all the people of the region died. The grazier folk are here identified as Berads, who

> spread over the province. Bhupatrao Berad built a fort in Khatau sub-division and plundered over the whole province. Upon this Dado Narasingh Arthavedi went to Bidar and secured the deputyship of the region, brought in notables and drove the Berads out ... The Berads went to Vidyanagar and met the Raja and became watchmen-cum-militia (*taliyari*) there.[89]

Since Vidyanagar (Vijayanagar) was hostile to the northern Sultans

[87] Hardiman, 'Power in the Forest', pp. 103–5.

[88] For example, the generally intelligent and thoughtful Forsyth writes of the Banjaras – 'It has been conjectured with some probability that they are gipsies.' *The Highlands of Central India*, p. 104n. Evidently he has at the back of his mind some notion of a single gipsy 'race' extending from Northern Europe to Southern India – a hypothesis apparently based on nothing more solid than the alleged eastern origin of the gipsies and the peripatetic habits of the Banjaras. When racial theory was wedded to Biblical genealogy, as in the work of the devout Christian John Wilson, it begets a particularly rich variety of nonsense, with the various sons of Noah fathering different 'races'.

[89] *SPD*, Vol. 45, p. 12.

this would have been the logical course of action for the Berads to take; and we may digress a little to consider the previous history of this identity. A forest based community of savage warriors, the Bedas (hunters) figured in Karnataka inscriptions from the ninth to the twelfth century as marauders from the western hills who raided villages and carried off cattle and women; however, at least some of their leaders had established themselves as chiefs over peasant villages, and were therefore attempting the transition to rulership.[90] It is likely that their talents would have been utilised by various rulers in the period of turmoil that ensued following Alauddin Khalji's attacks on kings of the peninsula (1294–1318) and they would have been an obvious source of recruits for the nascent empire of Vijaynagar in the early fourteenth century. The use of such peoples was indeed recommended by the early sixteenth-century monarch of Vijaynagar, Krishnadevaraya, whose maxims in the *Amuktamalyada* which exemplify the problems and the solutions found in medieval India:

> Minding the (small) faults of the forest chiefs who have not extensive power is like trying to clean a mud wall by pouring water over it. If he gets angry at them he cannot destroy them utterly. If (on the other hand) he attaches them to himself by kind words and charity they would be useful to him in invading foreign territory and plundering their fortresses. It is inconceivable that a king should be able to meet a hundred faults with a thousand punishments.[91]

It is evident then that the forest dwellers are seen as kind of necessary evil, impossible to extirpate but to be turned to advantage whenever possible. Their habitat is to destroyed in the interior of the kingdom, but encouraged on its borders as a defensive bulwark. Thus the attitude toward them will vary in great measure according to their position within the territory of the ruler, and the ruler's position within the larger political system. The Bedas of the Karnataka inscriptions were located in the mountain forests of the west, but would appear to have moved north into the contested marches between Vijayanagar and the Deccan sultanates. Peasant agriculture would recede from such ravaged lands, and they could best be held and used by militarised nomad herdsmen – hence perhaps the identification Berads as graziers in the Karhada tradition. Like the Cossack/Kazakh communities of the Eurasian borderlands, they would accommodate both displaced peasants and

[90] B. A. Saletore, *The Wild Tribes in Indian History* (Lahore: Motilal Banarsidas, 1935), pp. 66–71. The transition to kingship was achieved by the Hoysala dynasty, whose origins lay among 'the *malepas* or the hill chiefs of the Soseyur forests ...' B. D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Political Processes and the Structure of Polity in Early Medieval India', in Herman Kulke (ed.), *The State in India 1000–1700* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 220.

[91] Saraswati (trans.), 'Political Maxims', pp. 67, 72.

unemployed soldiers, and their military talents be utilised by all the regional powers. They certainly had a considerable military reputation by the seventeenth century:[92] so much so, that there was an evident possibility of their acquiring the identity of royal warriors – a sort of Southern equivalent of the Rajputs – this in turn reflecting their military importance in the political struggles of the southern peninsula. The name appears in Ferishta (*c.* 1610) as 'Bedar' (fearless), a tribe 'celebrated in the Deccan to this day for their bravery' who were the descendants of a Raja Bidur (contemporary of Alexander) who founded the city of Bidar![93] Ferishta, we should note, was informed that the (northern) Rajputs were a 'modern tribe' having originated in the *kaliyug* out of the illegitimate descendants of various kings, beginning one Raja Sooruj.[94] No such tainted descent was suggested for the Bedars. The Berads at this time were playing the role of infantry musketeers for the southern kings that Baksaria and other Rajputs of the north played for the Mughals.[95] Conferring status on one's allies, and lowering that of opponents was perhaps a part of the strategy of medieval rulership.

Berad Nayaks set up as independent rulers after the fall of Vijayanagara in 1565, and again during the wars between the Marathas and Mughals, and succeeded in establishing a small kingdom at Shorapur which lasted into the nineteenth century. However, it seems possible that their failure to make a lasting political accommodation with either Mughals or Marathas led to a downgrading of their status from that suggested by Ferishta, who, after all, was a client of the Sultan of Bijapur. The Berad ruler of Shorapur was actively wooed by Aurangzeb, who wrote offering the then Nayak great honour if he converted to Islam,[96] but the latter preferred to ally himself with the Marathas, and inflicted heavy losses on the Mughals before evacuating his stronghold of Wakinkhera in 1705.

This episode may explain why Khafi Khan, a dependent of the Mughal emperors, writing in the early eighteenth century takes pains to identify Pem Naik, as 'a *zamindar* of low origin, belonging to the tribe of

[92] Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib*: vol. IV (Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar, 1919), pp. 169–70, 388–9; vol. V (Calcutta, 1924), pp. 9–10.

[93] Briggs (trans.), *Rise of the Mahomedan Power*, I, pp. lviii–lix. Such attempts to elevate current statuses seem to have been common at the time: Ferishta also cites a historian who claimed that the Afghans 'were Copts of the race of the Pharaohs . . .' ibid., p.4.

[94] Ibid., p.lii.

[95] For the Baksariyas, see D. H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 169.

[96] Meadows Taylor saw the original letters marked with Auranzeb's palm-print in sandal-paste in the palace archives in Shorapur. They were destroyed together with other records when British troops stormed the fort in 1858. *The Story of My Life* 2 vols.(Edinburgh: Wm. Blackwood, 1877), II, p. 280.

Bedar, which is the Hindi for "fearless", sprang from the caste of *Dhers*, the most impure caste of the Dakhin'. Dhers were low-caste village servants, but in Pem Nayak's case, this had evidently been submerged in the larger identity of the professional infantry soldier until Khafi Khan chose to ascribe it. The identification of community and profession is evident in the same author's description of Wakinkhera, the stronghold of Pem Nayak's nephew Parya (elsewhere Pidia); it was 'inhabited by many *Barkandazes*, which name signifies 'black-faced infantry', and these people are famed for their skill in archery and missiles.'[97] The little kingdom soon re-established itself, and successfully manoeuvred between Mysore, Hyderabad and the Marathas in the eighteenth century. Meadows Taylor, who visited it in 1842, described how the Berads 'a clannish faction of 12,000 men and more . . . held the finest lands in all the villages . . .' The incomes from these perhaps allowed them to devote themselves to 'field sports of all kinds – hawking, coursing, hog-hunting and deer-shooting'. Their warrior status of course precluded productive labour – so none was a mechanic or artisan 'in any form or degree'. Reacting like a typical Victorian ethnographer, Taylor took this as a sign not of aristocratic aspiration but of innate savagery.[98] Had he lived to return to England, he would have discovered many savages in the home counties.

Shorapur did not, of course, contain the entire Berad community: the long wars created a great demand for soldiers, and it is likely that the high reputation of the Berad musketeers led the Marathas to start recruiting them to supplement (and probably counterbalance) the Mavles (as the people of the Sahyadri valleys were termed at the time). The introduction of a rival community may have been especially necessary after a delegation of the Mavle chiefs (*deshmukhs*) went and submitted to Aurangzeb in 1690.[99] By 1703, Berads seem to have comprised the entire garrison of Sinhgad, for we find Rajaram's successor, Shivaji II, writing to Vardhai, Khandai, Lakhmai, and Ganai Berads in that fort on 12 March 1703, commending them for their zeal in his service, and asking them to continue serving in the same way. Only a month later (16 April) this was followed by a reproachful letter:

> Aurangzeb besieged Sinhgad. It was against this eventuality that the king posted you there. You grew agitated, lost heart, negotiated and abandoned the fort and came to Rajgad. . . . Now in Rajgad go and meet Rajshri Shankraji Pandit Sachiv

[97] Trans. in H. M. Elliott and J. Dowson (eds.), *The History of India as told by Its Own Historians* (repr. New York: AMS Press, 1966), VII, pp. 377–8.
[98] Taylor, *The Story of My Life*, I, pp. 323, 326–7.
[99] 'Jedhe yanchi Shakavali', in *Shivacharitrapradipa*, p. 36.

and enrol in his following. Stay with him until the rainy season and contend with the enemy . . .[100]

Vardhai and his men then redeemed their standing by attacking and capturing Nyamat Khan, the Mughal military commander of the districts of Wai and Shirval. Vardhai Berad was a man of some importance in the Maratha service – nine years later he was posted at the important fort of Purandar and gathering a body of Berads to supplement the garrison, descended to defeat an enemy of the king Shahu below the fort.[101] Similarly Khandoji Khomne commanded a unit at the battle of Shakarkheda in 1724, where two of his men were wounded.[102] According to an early nineteenth-century genealogy, Khandoji was Vardhai's son; and the famous Umaji Naik Khomne's father Dadji, was Khandoji's grandson.[103] Over this period, the family retained the surname, but shed the Berad identity, and became Ramoshis. The letter of 1703 clearly identifies them as Berad, but when Mackintosh made his very careful enquiries in the early nineteenth century he concluded that the two were, and had long been, distinct:

The Berdurs who inhabit the district of Soorapoor, and are spread over the country east and south of Bejapoor, and the banks of the Toomboodra river, hold no intercourse whatever with the Ramoossies who reside in Maundesh . . . nor do the oldest men among the Ramoossies recollect having ever heard, that their fathers considered the Berdurs, and the Ramoossies, as being of the same descent or stock, or that they ever formed matrimonial connections with each other . . .[104]

With the consolidation of Maratha power under the Peshwas, infantrymen without local connections, such as Arabs, Hindustanis, and the peripatetic professionals trained in Western methods – '*gardis*' – began to replace the Bedars and cognate groups. However, it was not easy to displace them at the local level, as even the more strongly centralising colonial regime was to discover. In the first years of British rule at Pune there were so many robberies in the houses of the English officers there, as to cause each of them to employ a Ramoshi watchman at seven rupees a month. Mackintosh comments on this arrangement

Having thus succeeeded in levying blackmail from their European masters, the

[100] In fact, the fort had been secured by Aurangzeb by bribing the garrison (Sarkar, *Aurangzib*, IV, p. 190), and the mention of negotiations in the letter is a hint of this. For the Marathi source, see n.99.

[101] These letters were found by K. V. Purandare in the possession of Nana Naik, great-grandson of the famous Umaji Naik and published in *BISMT* VII 1–4 (1926–7), 74–8.

[102] *SPD*, 30, p. 270.

[103] This document is in *BISMT* 24, 3 (1944), 15.

[104] Mackintosh, 'A Sketch of the History of the Ramoossies', *Madras Journal* (April 1834), 128–9.

Naiks in charge of the Ramoossy police found it advantageous to engage persons of other castes to act as watchmen ... By this arrangement, many of the Ramoossies could follow their accustomed vocation of pillaging in Poona and the surrounding country as opportunities offered of doing so. It is now common to see Mangs, Dheres, and Koonbies, &c. performing the duties of watchmen, and who consequently style themselves Ramoossies. This is also the case at Bombay.[105]

This was also the standard method, of course, of buying immunity from plunder, and integrating the dangerous classes into the agrarian system. Perhaps the separation of Berad and Ramoshi that we have already noticed took place as a part of the integration into the northerly territory of the Peshwa: those aspiring to rise under the Brahmanical regime tried to Sanskritise by becoming 'Ramavamshi' while those connected with Mysore or the Nizam were content to remain 'Bedur', or fearless.[106] In the much-contested Bagalkot and Badami area, similar groups chose to emphasise their unarmed combat skills, by calling themselves 'mushtigir', literally fist-fighter. Marshall wrote of them in 1822

They are in possession of many Patelships or Naekships, (which sems to have been the higher title) of the smaller villages, which they seem to have inherited as subordinate officers of the Desaees who are of the same tribe ... Some of them affect the higher military title of Kshitree with a proportional increase of swaggering, dissoluteness and idleness, generally combined with the most wretched poverty.[107]

In the Poona area, at any rate, the claim to *kshatriyatva* was not backed by sufficient political power to be successful, and the Brahmans whom Mackintosh consulted classified the Ramoshis as children of a 'Dombh father and Pulkassy mother' and very low in the social hierarchy. They evidently also offered another (to them) more pejorative etymology for Ramoshi – that it was a corruption of Raanvussy – dweller in the waste or woodland. In Mysore however, their military importance of the Bedars elevated their standing, and the *Gazetteer* compiled at the beginning of the twentieth century recorded that they 'have attained a high position in the social scale, but this is largely due to their having been, in the wars of the 18th century, engaged as soldiers in Hyder's armies, and later in the irregular hordes kept up by a number of Palaigars ...' In conformity with the latest findings of 'raciology', the

105 Mackintosh, 'Rammoossies', *Madras Journal* (July 1835), 237.

106 Some of the Ramoshis maintained, according to Mackintosh, that the etymology was 'Ramvounssy the descendants of Rama; that he created them when he was passing through the Dekhan to Lunka (Ceylon), in search of Seetah' *Madras Journal* (July 1834), 127–8.

107 Marshall, *Reports*, p. 131.

Gazetteer nonetheless classified them as 'pre-Dravidian jungle tribes'.[108] In the 1991 Census, Ramoshis have vanished from Maharashtra, and Bedars are a Scheduled Caste[109]

[108] C. Hayavadana Rao (ed.), *Mysore Gazetteer*, 5 vols. (repr. Delhi: B.R. Publications, 1984), I, p. 144.

[109] Census of India 1991 – Maharashtra Part II-B Annexure 1.

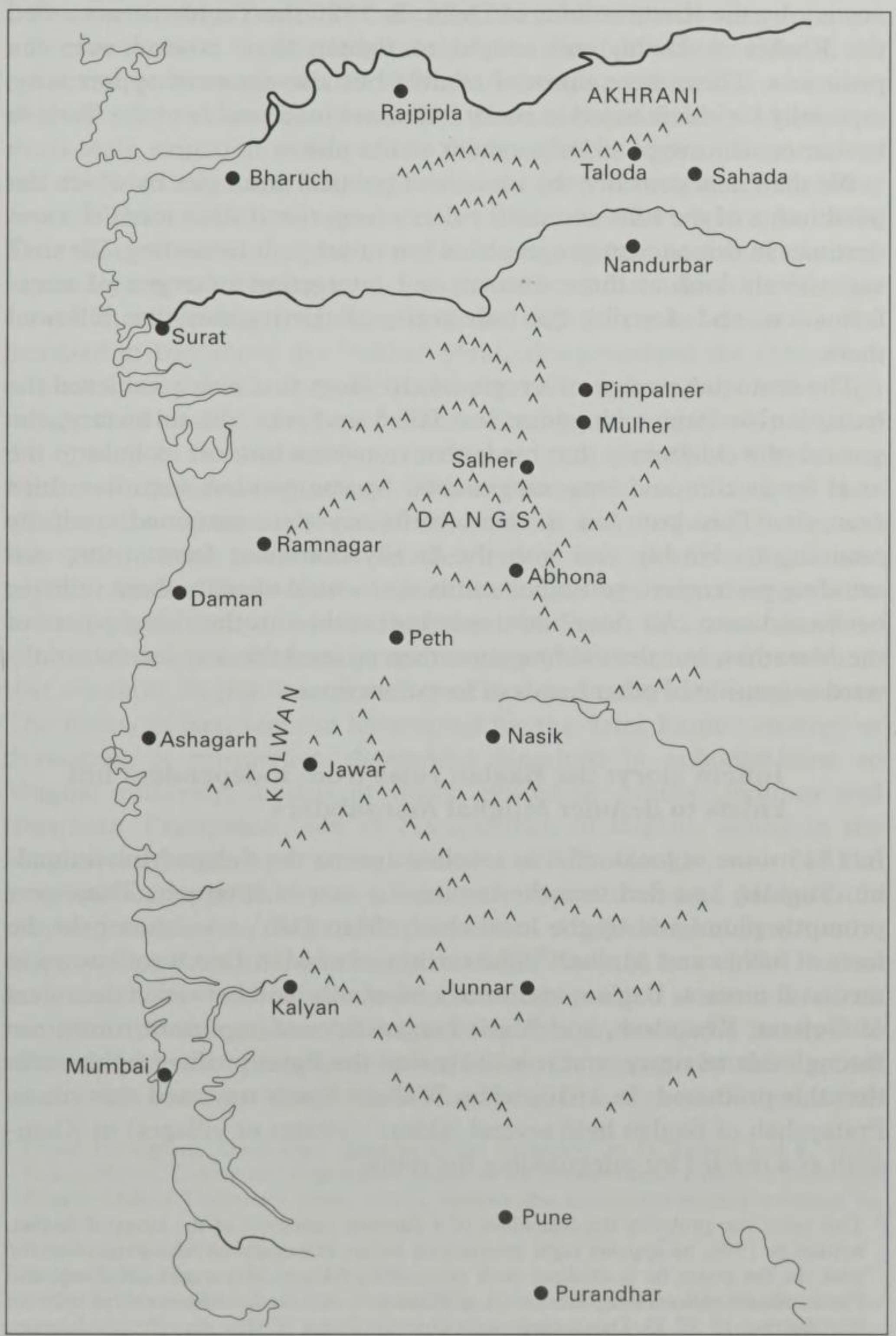
3 State formation in the highland forests 1350–1800

Introduction: strategic location and regional power

The previous chapter looked at peripatetic ethnicities that moved across considerable distances; we now turn to a much more localised exemplar of the same processes. Immediately east of the coastal plain that stretches south from the gulf of Cambay is a triangular knot of difficult mountains through which the Narmada and Tapti cut their way to the sea at the important harbours of Bharuch and Surat respectively. East of the mountains lies more open country, long the seat of established agrarian regimes which needed access to the seaports and trade of the Indian Ocean and which also needed, therefore, to maintain transit through the forests and mountains. But if these forested hills were an obstacle from one point of view, they were a resource from another: they could be strongholds, bases and customs posts, and in their recesses grew the great timbers needed for mansions and ships. Not surprisingly, therefore, the expansion of trade in the Indian Ocean region in the early centuries of the current era was accompanied by settlement and state-formation. Cave-shrines began to be excavated at suitable locations for holy men to take their cut from the tolls and booty, and villages granted to Brahmans – for example, Pimpalner in western Khandesh granted by a Chalukya king in 377–8 CE.[1] Dynastic regimes, sometimes acknowledging their dependence on the greater kingdoms of the Dakhan took shape along the coast and by the late thirteenth century, the lord of the Konkan, Krishnadeva, was a subordinate of the Yadava rulers of the western Dakhan. He was the son of 'Bamideva', – who, under the name of 'Bimba' became famous in the historical traditions of the northern Konkan as a paladin whose feats spanned miles and centuries with equal ease.[2] The Yadavas of Devagiri were first subordinated, and then

[1] S. B. Deo, *Maharashtra va Gove Shilalekh-Tamrapatanchi Varnatmak Sandarbha Suchi* (Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, 1985), no. 526.

[2] Ibid., no. 391, copper-plate dated 1290 CE. The identification of Bamideva is my suggestion.



Map 3 The West Coast

ousted, by the Khalji sultans of Delhi. In 1320 the Tughlaqs succeeded the Khaljis in Delhi, and sought to tighten their control over the peninsula. These were times of trouble but also times of opportunity, especially for chiefs based in rocky fastnesses inaccessible to the Turkish horsemen who swept all before them on the plains.

We shall now consider the social and political strategies by which the inhabitants of the hills and their rulers renegotiated their identities and destinies in this ancient geographical but novel political setting. We shall successively look at three distinct, but interacting strategies of state-formation, and describe the trajectories of the regimes that followed them.

The first study is that of a regional chiefdom that nearly achieved the transition to Rajput kingdom, but failed and was lost to history; the second of a chieftaincy that made that transition but lost its links to the local forest elite and was marginalised by competition from our third example. This last was a clan chieftaincy that sustained itself by retaining its kinship ties with the locally dominant forest tribe, and avoiding pretensions to Rajput status that would alienate these militant backwoodsmen. All three ultimately succumbed to the rising power of the Marathas, but their subjugation then opened the way for the southward expansion of other bands of forest warriors.

Infirm glory: the Baglan rajas from independent hill chiefs to defunct Mughal mansabdars

In 1345 some of local officials rebelled against the Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq and fled into the mountains east of Bharuch. They were promptly plundered by the local chief, 'Man Deo', who then held the forts of Salher and Mulher.[3] The territories of Man Deo were known in medieval times as Baglan, and were a no-man's land betweeen the rulers of Gujarat, Khandesh, and Ahmednagar. Several important routes ran through this territory, and it is likely that the Rajas profited by the tolls that this produced. In 1610, when William Finch traversed that route, Pratapshah of Baglan held several 'aldeas' (estates or villages) in Khandesh as a reward for safeguarding the route.[4]

[3] This ruler was probably the Nanadeva of a Sanskrit panegyric of the kings of Baglan, written in 1596; he appears eight generations before Narayanshah who patronised the poet. In the poem he is credited with conquering Salher, Mayuragiri (Mulher), and Pisola. *Rashtraudhavamsa Mahakavya of Rudrakavi*, ed. E. Krishnamacharya with an introduction by C. D. Dalal, Gaikwad's Oriental Series V (Baroda: Central Library, 1917), p. 18. Dalal gives the genealogy on pp. xxii–iii.

[4] W. Foster (ed.), *Early Travels in India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), pp. 136–7.

But the strategic position of the kingdom also created other opportunities for profit: it may be recalled that the rains fall most heavily on the coast and western mountains of Maharashtra, and therefore a number of rivers and streams rise there. The latter were admirably adapted to small-scale irrigation works which dammed them high in their valleys and then led the water through channels (*pat*) to irrigate fields lower down.[5] This enabled the production of fine rices for export. In 1666, Thevenot remarked that the rice of this area was 'the best in the Indies, especially towards Naoupura . . .' and also noted the cultivation of sugar cane.[6] Furthermore, irrigation, and the slightly cooler climate a few hundred metres above the Dakhan plain, also permitted the cultivation of such luxury fruits as grapes, and the *Ain* commented on the high standard of local horticulture.[7] These developments inevitably implied the presence of aristocratic consumers and smoothly functioning markets for perishable products. This in turn would require a large class of subordinate peasants to toil in the orchards and the paddy fields, and the concomitant conversion of the forests into swidden fields and pasture lands. Thousands of pack bullocks regularly traversed the country along the route from Burhanpur to Surat, and must also have made major demands on its forage resources.[8] We may therefore assume that much of Baglan was denuded of woods, and settled by peasants. The Rajas, in fact, seem to have opted for the 'later Rajput' strategy of developing a prosperous dependent kingdom in subordination to Mughal authority, models of which existed in Amber, Jodhpur and elsewhere. Pratapshah, son of Narayanshah of Baglan, joined in the Mughal campaigns against the sultanate of Ahmadnagar, and took the long-awaited opportunity to plunder the open country.[9] However, a proper transition to Rajput status needed a genealogical link to the (supposedly) Rathor kings of early medieval Kanauj. So in 1596 Rudrakavi, a scholar from south India, was imported to write a Sanskrit panegyric providing that connection. By this account, the family had ruled at Kanauj for many generations before the younger brothers set off southwards to set up independent kingdoms. One of them, Sohad, came

[5] David Hardiman, 'Small-Dam Systems of the Sahyadris' in D. Arnold and R. Guha (eds.), *Nature, Culture and Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), reviews the nineteenth-century evidence on these works.

[6] Sen (ed.), *Indian Travels*, p. 102.

[7] Bhimsen, *Nuskha*, p. 80; *Ain*, II, p. 257.

[8] In 1615 Thomas Roe passed 10,000 bullocks laden with grain in a single day; and he saw similar though smaller convoys on other occasions as well. W. Foster (ed.), *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Moghul 1615–1619*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1889), I, p. 88.

[9] *Rashtraudhavamsa Mahakavya of Rudrakavi*, pp. 111–12.

to Pimpalner in eastern Khandesh and killed 500 Bhils; his aspect so intimidated the Yadava king Ramadeva of Devagiri that he gave his daughter in marriage to Sohad's brother Yashasvan together with the lower Konkan as an appanage.[10] This legend combined two sources of legitimacy: descent from the last Hindu paramount monarch of north India as well as from his southern equivalent – Ramadeva Yadava. The northern Rajputs seem to have been disposed to accept these wealthy and powerful allies; and invented several genealogies to accommodate them. According to the one supplied to the Mughal scholar Abul Fazl, Jaichand of Kanauj had three sons, Ashwathama, Sutik and Aj, of whom the last-named founded the kingdom of Baglana.[11] A different genealogy with the same object is found Nainsi's massive compilation (*c.* 1660–72). This stated that the thirteen branches of the Rathors were descended from the thirteen sons of Raja Dhundhamara – the third son was Bagula, who established Buglana.[12] Bagul was by this time a clan name, and in Rudrakavi's panegyric Narayanshah is addressed as 'Bagulbhumipalatilak' at the end of each canto. Pratapshah also took advantage of Mughal protection to threaten the two smaller kingdoms of Jawar and Ramnagar that lay between his territories and the coast. Jawar was rendered tributary, and Baglan secured a share of the blackmail paid to by the Portuguese of Damao to the Raja of Ramnagar. We must now digress to consider the origins of these two western neighbours of Baglan.

In the early nineteenth century the courtiers of Jawar claimed that Jayaba Mukney had grown powerful in the early fourteenth century, and that the Padshah of Delhi had given his son Nemshah a royal order, making him a hereditary raja in 1341 CE, and the founder of Jawar state. An era was then instituted from the date of the grant, and was still in use in 1823.[13] If the date is correct, the Padshah would be Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, and it is possible that the date was that of the refounding of the Baglan raj by Man Deo. The fortunate survival of a chronicle whose earliest chapter is dated (by its editor, V. K. Rajvade) to 1448 CE enables us to catch a glimpse of social and political change in the North Konkan from this time on. It must be emphasised that this collection of manuscripts was not primarily written as a history, and much of it was an effort assert the statuses and privileges of particular lineages and *jatis* in the northern Konkan. At the end of the manuscript,

[10] *Mahakavya*, p. 16.
[11] *Ain-i-Akbari*, trans. H. S. Jarrett, 2nd edn, corrected by Jadunath Sarkar (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1949), II, p. 276.
[12] B. P. Sakariya (ed.), *Mumhta Nainsiri Khyat*, pt. 3 (Jodhpur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, 1993), pp. 218–19.
[13] *SRBG*, 26, p. 14.

the copyist declares it to be a *vamshavali* – a record of lineages. A substantial part of the text is composed of lists of families and clans as well as details of land administration and hereditary offices. Past events entered into it because the effort was to link the institution of these rights to the legendary founder-king, Bimba or Pratapbimba or some of his successors. Variants of this manuscript are also to be found, suggesting that these stories were widely known in the northern Konkan.[14] None the less, the work also has a substantial historical content. Many of the events mentioned, such as the fall of Devagiri to Alauddin Khalji, the appointment of Navait Muslim governors in the Konkan, the arrival of the Portuguese, and their annexation of the lands of the Raja of Patta are supported by other historical sources.

Apart from family names and details, an important theme in the narrative is that of the loss of caste due to political and social alliance with the *Kaivartak* or Koli community, whose help had to be invoked so as to destroy a tyrannical ruler. Koli seems to have been an old ethnonym in this region – several inscriptions contain place names such as Kol-palli (Koli hamlet), and these were located both in the mountains and among the shallow creeks and inaccessible swamps of the coast.[15] Political turmoil would give bold men from amongst them the chance to rise to power, and Jayaba Mukney may well have been one such. We have, however, no early record of his existence. Attempts at reconstituting the Brahmanical order in the face of Islam would focus on incorporating such *parvenu* potentates, and hence (I suggest) the popularity of the story that a number of gentry families of high birth had their sacred threads torn and were reduced to the status of the Koli whose aid they had taken. The strategic intent was clearly to differentiate the Kolis and grant higher status to some favoured lineages, which might then be expected to patronise the obliging Brahmin literati who transmitted the story.[16]

So the printed version of the chronicle tells us how Pratapshah, a son of the last Yadava of Deogiri ruled for some years, but was displaced by a rival. His legitimate line became extinct, but (the *bakhar* continues) he had a son named Devshah, born of a slave-woman; Devshah's son was Ramshah. During a period of confusion in the Sultanate of Gujarat, Ramshah rebelled, established his rule over 157 villages and named the tract Ramnagar. The Koli (unnamed) of Jawar was one of the nobles

[14] Another version, lacking the many Pauranic stories incorporated into printed work is in the OIOC – Mss Add 26,494b.
[15] Deo, *Suchi*, nos.105, 694, 619.
[16] OIOC Mss Add 26,494B fos. 36b-40a. Here the sailor Goma Tandel of the printed text is explicitly identified as a 'Koli' – fo.38b.

(*ubrao*) of the Ramnagar raj. In 1500 the Portuguese first appeared on the coast, and subsequently established bases and began to occupy the country, killing the *padshah* (sultan of Gujarat) by treachery in 1535. Wars broke out with the local chiefs. The Pattekar raja ultimately lost his entire kingdom to them, and they occupied some of the coastal villages of Ramnagar. The latter raja fought against them for a while, lost the open country along the coast, but then came to an agreement by which *chauth* (theoretically a fourth of the revenues) would be paid to him.[17] In fact, it seems likely that the coastal lands had already passed to the Sultans of Gujarat, and the Ramnagar raja, ensconced in the forests merely received a tribute from their occupants. This is certainly the picture presented in a Portuguese document of 1568, which says that the king of Sarcetas claimed that the lands of Damao belonged originally to his family, but had been lost to the more powerful king of Cambaia; so the Sarceta rulers retreated into the mountains and jungles. However, the kings of Sarzeta continually attacked the lost lands, and the king of Cambay then granted them the *chauth* to end those raids. The Portuguese of Damao made the same concession, but stipulated that the interior lands were to pay less than 25 per cent, and the border villages somewhat more.[18] Soon after this agreement, the *bakhar* tells us, the Koli of Jawar broke away from Ramnagar: the Kolis were so powerful that the Ramnagar king preferred to avoid conflict with them.[19] It is possible that the free-lance warriors of the forests did not welcome the agreement which would result in payments directly into their rulers' treasury and enlarge his power, and (probably) his social pretensions.

This is also suggested by the geographical considerations. We must begin by identifying some crucial locations, starting with the Chauthia's capital, Asarceta or Sarzeta. I think it likely that this was the place marked on the 1977 Survey of India map as Ashagarh, approximately eight kilometres east of Dahanu.[20] It is likely that the Raja's authority in this area was being destroyed by the developing power of Jawar, forcing him to shift northwards, for in 1663 we find him mentioned as ruling the lands east of Damao, with the lands to the south being controlled by the 'Cole'. Now, Ashagarh lies *south* of Damao, so it would seem that the Chauthia raja had lost his southern lands to the Koli raja of Jawar, and moved seventy kilometres north, to Ramnagar (modern Dharampur) while still retaining the title of Raja of Sarzeta. So, in 1670 a

[17] *Mahikavatichi Bakhar*, pp. 103–5.
[18] Document in A. Lobato, *Relacoes Luso-Maratas 1658–1737* (Lisboa: Centro de Estudos Historicos Ultramarinos, 1965), p. 22 n.1.
[19] *Mahikavatichi Bakhar*, p. 105.
[20] All map references in this paragraph are to the Survey of India 1: 1 million map of Gujarat and Maharashtra, 1977.

treaty identifies him as 'Rey de Asarceta' but speaks of the cordial union between the people of 'Ramanaguel' and Damao.[21]

As for Tavar, the capital of the 'Colle', I would identify it with Jawar – probably the dental 'tz' pronunciation of the name led to its being written with the initial 't' by the Portuguese. Furthermore, it is described as located behind ranges of hills and dense forests, some fifteen days' march from the Portuguese frontier, and this would be true of Jawar. Finally, exiting from the valley commanded by the town, a Portuguese expedition was nearly defeated in a narrow defile, which may be identified with the 'mountain gate' (*dangachi met*) shown on the modern maps. (See the paragraph below.) Thus, by the late sixteenth century, when the incursion from Baglan occurred, the Ramnagar raja was losing control of strongholds in his original southern location to insurgent chiefs more deeply rooted among the pugnacious folk of the hills.

It is probably in reaction to this local dissidence that the Ramnagar chiefs of the late sixteenth century are found developing alliances with major exterior powers. In 1576, after the Mughals conquered Gujarat, the Ramnagar ruler was duly enrolled as a Mughal mansabdar with the rank of 1,500 horse.[22] Three years later, by a treaty with Fernao de Miranda de Azevedo, Ramadev Rana also enrolled himself as a vassal of the king of Portugal.[23] The Kolis meanwhile remained hostile to Ramnagar and continued to raid the Portuguese lands; and in 1583 a joint expedition was mounted against them. Fernao de Miranda, accompanied by the king of Sarzeta set out against the 'Coles'. According to the Portuguese account, the expedition advanced through dense forests and difficult hills to the capital of the Koli king – a fine city with many stone buildings overlooking a well-cultivated plain – and destroyed it. They were severely harassed on the return march by a force estimated at 6,000 men, which was beaten off at a narrow defile, with the aid of the king of Sarzeta. The Portuguese chronicler boasted that the Kolis' loss was so great that for many years they could not muster the strength to descend into the plains, and their king sent to sue for peace, which the Viceroy granted him.[24]

The policy of using Sarzeta to guard the boundaries of the Portuguese

[21] Letter of 1663, cited in P. S. Pissurlencar (ed.), *Assentos do Conselho do Estado*, 5 vols. (Bastora: Tipografia Rangel, 1956), III, p. 169 n.1; and J. F. J. Biker (ed.), *Colleccao de Tratados e Concertos de Pazes* 10 vols. (Lisboa: Impresa Nacional, 1881–85), II, p. 70. He clung obstinately to the old title, and we find a number of references to him as king of Asarceta and 'the lands of Ramnagar' – Biker, *Tratados*, p. 76; *Assentos*, V, p. 276.

[22] M. F. Lokhandwala (trans.), *Mirat-i-Ahmadi* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1965), p. 114.

[23] See Biker, *Tratados*, II, p. 62.

[24] *Da Asia de Diogo do Couto – Decada Decima* (Lisboa: Regio Officina Typografica, 1788), III, pp. 343–54.

lands continued, but the relationship was periodically renegotiated by violence and chicaner. In 1604 the king of Portugal (and Spain) was compelled to order the captains of Damao to desist from paying the *chauth* with useless horses and other goods assessed at exagggerated values, and to pay in cash, without deductions for supposed debts.[25] The Rana does not seem to have been satisfied, and resorted to self-help; in 1613 he raided and plundered several villages. Frere de Andrade set off, surprised 600 of the enemy camped on a hill, killed many, and successfully retired to Damao with much spoil, though pursued by 700 men. Another agreement regarding the *chauth* was none the less made in 1615, by the terms of which the king of Sarzeta agreed to serve with 1,000 foot and 100 horse.[26] The same pattern of conflict and compromise continues for decades – the Portuguese, like the Sultans of Gujarat, could defeat forest-based chiefs if they were encountered in the open field, but could not destroy the habitat from which they issued, and ultimately had to buy protection and strategic alliances in order to allow production and trade to continue. On the other hand, the successful use of this strategy would depend on the weaker regime not exposing itself to matching reprisals by developing fixed habitations, palaces or cities. Jawar is one example of a widespread phenomenon; north of the Tapti, the ruler of the similar state of Rajpipla also enrolled as an imperial mansabdar in 1572, but in 1626 Pelsaert mentions that his forces would come pillaging up to, or even within, the Mughal city of Surat.[27]

Local conflicts and wider alliances

We have already suggested that it was pressure from the local Koli population rallying round Jawar that pushed the Ramnagar raj to seek external supports via subordinate alliance with major polities such as the newly arrived Mughals and Portuguese. Ramnagar also sought alliance with larger regional powers, notably with the little kingdom of Baglan.

Challenged by Koli insurgency, threatened by Portuguese expansion, irrevocably committed to the aristocratic pretensions that set them apart from the bulk of their subjects, the Ramnagar rulers had to buttress their local power by linking themselves with larger regional networks of political alliance. It is probably at this time that the genealogical connec-

[25] Biker, *Tratados*, II, pp. 81–3.
[26] A. F. Moniz *Noticias e Documentos para a Historia de Damao: Antiga Provincia do Norte*, 3 vols. (Bastora: Tipografia Rangel, 1900–1917), I, pp. 274–5.
[27] *Jahangir's India* trans. W. H. Moreland and P. Geyl (1925; rept Idarah-i Adabiyat- i Dilli, 1972), p. 59.

tion with the Yadavas of Deogiri (made in the *bakhar*) was abandoned in favour of the Rathore identity claimed into the early nineteenth century. This linkage was confirmed by the grant of a part of the *chauth* of Damao to 'Berba' (Bhaironba? of Baglan?) perhaps as a part of a marriage settlement, since a later Rana identified Berba as his uncle. However this opened the way for interference from Baglana, and in 1615, after 'Berba' had died, the then Baglan ruler began to demand the *chauth* from the Portuguese. Jaeda (Jaidev?) Rana of Sarzeta protested, and insisted that Damao should have no dealings with Bahirji or the 'Bagulos'.[28] His successor, Somadeva renewed the alliance, for the *Maathir-ul Umra* states that Soma Deo was the son-in-law of Baharji of Baglan; however Somadev Rana evidently also gave a daughter to some branch of the Baglan family, for among the signatories to yet another peace with the Portuguese in 1670 was Crusnadas Bagul, described as son-in-law of Somadev.[29]

In the late 1630s, the entire region was shaken up by the ambitions of the prince Aurangzeb, who perhaps aimed to strengthen his rear before a further advance into the Dakhan. Baharji was briefly besieged in Mulher by the imperial forces, and agreed to surrender it, and seven other forts, in return for the grant of the potentially rich sub-division of Sultanpur as inam, and an appointment as mansabdar of three thousand in the imperial service.[30] At the same time, as an alarmed Portuguese viceroy reported, Mughal soldiers overran Sarzeta and the Koli kingdom, and the people of Damao feared an attack.[31] They agreed to pay 20,000 mahmudis a year to the Mughals in addition to the 40,000 paid to the Ramnagar ruler, who had fled to Damao for safety.[32] Ramnagar bought immunity from the Mughals with the small payment of 10,000 rupees, and Jawar seems to have paid nothing at this time – probably the cost of occcupying it proved too high. However, the formal annexation of Baglan evidently destroyed the political equilibrium that its rulers had established in the mountain forests, and rebels were active all over the region by 1639, with one Jangya Bhil prominent among them.[33] Former subordinates of the Baglan raja, such the Dalvi family of Peth also began to jockey for power, and all this on top of the ravages

[28] Biker, *Tratados*, I, p. 198.
[29] *Maathir-ul Umara*, I, p. 353; Biker, *Tratados*, II, p. 73.
[30] A. J. Syed (trans.), *Aurangzeb in the Muntakhab-Al Lubab* (Bombay: Somaiya Press, 1977), p. 23.
[31] Letter of 11 September 1638, cited in K. L. Shiveshwarkar, 'Portugisanchi Mughal Darbare Rajkarnen', *BISMT* 6, 1–4 (1925–6), 52–3.
[32] Pissurlencar (ed.), *Assentos*, III, pp. 102–3.
[33] Contemporary Persian documents, with Marathi summaries were published by G. H. Khare, 'Aitihasika Farsi Sahitya', *BISMT* 15, 3 (1934), 1–12.

of the imperial armies, led to a rapid fall in the tax yield of Baglan, from the (perhaps exaggerated) fifty lakh rupees under its earlier rulers to three or four lakhs under the Mughals.[34] Such a metamorphosis would imply the large-scale abandonment of cultivated land and irrigation systems, and the regrowth of malarious secondary jungles to shelter guerillas and impede armies. None the less, Aurangzeb planned to thrust south against the sultans of the Dakhan, and some settlement had to be made of the area. So one branch of the Dalvis was allowed to retain the principality of Peth after their conversion to Islam, and Jawar compelled to acknowledge the notional suzerainty of the Emperor in 1656.[35] Bahirji's successor Bairam Shah converted to Islam, and exchanged his perhaps desolate estate of Sultanpur for Paunar in the plain of Berar. By the end of the the century the lineage had lost Paunar to another resurgent tribe – the Gonds of Deogarh, and vanished from the historical record.[36]

Returning to our narrative, once Aurangzeb's attention was diverted to his southern wars and the overthrow of Shahjahan, it would seem that local power soon reasserted itself in the western mountains. The rule of the new kingdom of Peth took over the Baglan Rajan's title of Bahirji (Vergi) as is evident from a Portuguese letter of 1663 describing the states east of Damao. These were the 'King Vergi, of the nation of Moors [i.e. a Muslim], and subject to the Mogol'; then the 'Choutea' (Ramnagar), and finally 'the Colle' (the king of Jawar). Both the latter prudently lived among 'jagged mountains and dense forests'.[37]

The independence that such location conferred is evident from Manucci's description of the political mission on which he was sent by the Mughal general Jai Singh as part of the latter's campaign against Shivaji in 1664–5. Manucci's task was to secure the support of three Rajas through whose lands Shivaji had passed to attack the port of Surat in 1664. These were the rulers of 'Ramanagar, Pentt and Chotia ... the Portuguese call them kings of the Colles'. Jai Singh warned that he would attack them if they did not agree to oppose Shivaji, and deny him passage, but if they accepted and sent they their sons to court, they would receive pay and rank befitting their condition. There was no allusion to their previous submission to the Empire. Manucci remarked

[34] Sadiq Khan cited in Syed, *Aurangzeb*, p. 23 n.27.

[35] For Peth, see *SRBG* 26, pp. 108–9; for Jawar and Ramnagar, see Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib* (Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar, 1912), 53–4, 209–10.

[36] *Maathir-al Umra*, pp. 352–3; C. U. Wills, *The Raj Gond Maharajas of the Satpura Hills* (Nagpur: Central Provinces Government Press, 1923), p. 170.

[37] Letter of 1663 cited in *Assentos*, III, p. 169n. The original Bahirji ('Vergi'), lineage having left Khandesh, the allusion to a Moor (Muslim), Bahirji was evidently to the ruler of Peth, who had been installed by Prince Aurangzeb after conversion to Islam.

that the Ramnagar territory lay among 'frightful hills and gloomy forests.' Of the Koli lands generally, he said that they were 'full of hills and rocks and very difficult for fighting in. The habits of these people are barbarous, their features ugly, and complexion black; they go almost naked, having only a simple cloth . . .'[38] It is clear that Jawar had grown sufficiently formidable to secure a share in the *chauth* of Damao, for the Abbé Carré, who travelled down the coast in 1672 stated that the subsidy of 60,000 mamudis was paid to the king of the 'Cosles' and the 'Chotia' so that they would restrain bandits who raided Portuguese territory.[39] This arrangement was under strain by 1670, for when the Ramnagar raja ratified the treaty of 1635, an additional article stipulated that he should aid the Portuguese with fifty musketeers, sixty horse and 1,000 Bhils in a campaign against the 'enemy Colle'. The Kolis anticipated the slow-moving Portuguese, and 'made a sortie from their woods and mountains like raging lions, and fell like a torrent upon the outskirts of Tarapur'.[40]

It also is interesting that the treaty presumed that Raja's following to be of Bhils. It is likely that the Kolis had rallied to the avowedly Koli ruler of Jawar, and so Ramnagar was drawing on Bhil warriors from the northward in order to balance them. A few years later, a Mughal source reported that 3–4,000 Bhils of Ramnagar held the jungles and passes of that territory against the northward advance of the Marathas towards Surat.[41] Again in 1677, when the Ramnagar Raja asked the Portuguese to shelter his family in Damao while he attacked Shivaji, his avowed plan was to raise the Bhils ('Billis') and range the hills and jungles.[42]

But both Jawar and Ramanagar had now come up against a master in the strategic use of terrain and surprise. As we shall see in the next chapter, Shivaji had been gradually destroying the petty chieftains of the mountains to the south of Baglan, and he was bound, at some time, to turn his attention northward too. In 1670, the Raja of Jawar demanded that the whole *chauth* be assigned to him and burst into the coastal lands to enforce his claim. The Portuguese government refused payment, but some of the villages paid him off secretly. Military operations were ineffective, because the raja kept out of reach. Ravaging his lands and settlements was of no avail – there was little to destroy. So Manoel Furtado sent a secret message to Shivaji who, in April–May 1672,

[38] N. Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, trans. with intro. and notes W. Irvine, 3 vols. (repr. Calcutta: Editions India, 1966), II, pp. 122–4.
[39] *The Travels of the Abbé Carré in India and the Near East 1672 to 1674*, 2 vols. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1947), I, pp. 169–70.
[40] Carré *Travels*, II, p. 174.
[41] Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib* (Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar, 1919), p. 210.
[42] *Assentos*, IV, p. 257.

completely overran Jawar and Ramnagar, and forced their rulers to flee to Damao.[43]

The Koli kingdoms between Marathas and Mughals

With these events, the hill kingdoms were hurled into the maelstrom of Dakhan politics. Their strategic location made passage through their territories vital for both Maratha and Mughal as war raged around the hill forts of the Sahyadri and Satmala and spread into the plains beyond. Shivaji annexed Ramnagar and Jawar, and demanded that Damao now pay *chauth* to him – something that the local inhabitants were more than anxious to concede.[44] The central authorities of the Estado delayed this by claiming that he was not in full control of the territory – Vikramshah of Jawar had in fact allied himself with the Mughals and was waging a guerilla war against the Marathas. In 1677, he, and a Mughal officer named Sidi Fakir were both defeated at Nasik by Moropant, minister of Shivaji.[45]

The Ramnagar raja seems to have remained quiet until after the death of Shivaji in 1680. The next year he sought financial aid from the Portuguese, but was refused; he then plundered many villages in Damao in order to pay his soldiers. As a result, the Estado agreed to pay him the arrears of his *chauth* after deducting the value of the damage caused.[46] Shivaji's successor Sambhaji succcessfully excluded the Raja from his former kingdom; it was not till 1688, when the great Mughal offensive led by Aurangzeb began to achieve some success, that the 'Choutea' (Ramnagar) recovered his lands.[47] The same appears to have been true of Vikramshah of Jawar, who in 1688 triumphantly reported the capture of the fort of Kohaj to Aurangzeb.[48]

Such auxiliaries played an important role in the Mughal campaign against the Marathas. Vikram Shripat of Jawar entered the Mughal service, and served as commandant of Bhiwandi. After his death, Matabar Khan, the governor of the Konkan sought preferment for his young son reminding the Emperor that the 'tribe of Kolis is spread in his

[43] The events of 1670–72 were recapitulated in a letter from the city of Damao to the Viceroy 28 May 1677, *Assentos*, IV, Appendix, pp. 556–8.

[44] See the letter of 28 May 1677 in ibid.

[45] Apte and Divekar (eds.) *Shivacharitrapradipa*, p. 29.

[46] *Assentos*, IV, p. 384.

[47] In 1710 the Captain of Damao recalled that the lands were recovered sixteen years after Shivaji had captured them i.e. in 1687–88; *Assentos*, V, pp. 256–7.

[48] S. Madhavarao Pagdi (ed. and trans. into Marathi), *Moghal Darbarchi Batmipatren 1685–1700* (Mumbai: Maharashtra Rajya ani Sanskruti Mandala, 1978), p. 2; Pagdi, *Studies in Maratha History* (Kolhapur: Shivaji University, 1971), p. 34.

estate from Jawhar to the ghat [pass] of Junner.'[49] He similarly recommended that a new ruler of Ramnagar should be given an Imperial rank (*mansab*) and a lucrative assignment of lands (*jagir*) because 'if the Zamindar gets a small mansab and the jagirs are not restored to him, it is possible that the Kolis may join the Marathas and create disturbances'.[50] Grants and assignments from imperial revenues thus enhanced the splendour and increased the followings of compliant Rajas, but by the beginning of the eighteenth century, with the Marathas intercepting Mughal revenues, even the Imperial camp was short of funds, and officers in outlying posts must have been in greater difficulties. In such circumstances, I would suggest, the raja of Jawar might still muster a following on the basis of ethnic affinity, but the Ramnagar Rana would find himself stranded, no kin to either Marathas or Kolis. Not surprisingly, therefore, in March 1710 we find the Rana fleeing to Damao with his family, leaving his lands in the possession of the king of Jawar. He then petitioned the Estado for two years' *chauth* in advance so as to raise an an army to recover his territory.[51] He was evidently put off, for we find him leaving Aurangabad two years later, having failed to secure any assistance from the Mughals either. He finally procured a force of cavalry and infantry from a Maratha source, and the Portuguese, anxious about the proximity of the 'Colle' to their own lands, agreed to supply him cannon, powder, shot and some cash, to be debited to his *chauth*.[52] Perhaps the resulting debits were larger than he had expected, for in 1718 he raided the lands of Damao and carried off peasants, cattle and other plunder. The Portuguese advanced to his town of Fatehpur and burned it, but could not recover the prisoners. However, the king died of a fall from his horse, and his nephew, who succeeded him, released the captives.[53]

The connection with Mughal power lasted into the eighteenth century, and the Mughal successor-state in the South continued to sustain the Ramnagar dynasty's claims to high status. In 1727–8, when the Nizam invaded western Maharashtra his retinue included Sambhaji Bhosle, a claimant to the Maratha throne, who was then duly married into the family of the Ramnagar chief. This act simultaneously emphasised the social similarity of the Bhosle and Ramnagar families, and their subordination to the representative of Mughal authority.[54] Four years later, the Nizam's officer in that region of divided sovereignty was accused of encouraging the ruler of Jawar to plunder the Peshwa's

[49] Trans. by Pagdi in *Studies*, II, p. 34. [50] Ibid., II, p. 37.
[51] *Assentos*, V, pp. 256–7. [52] *Assentos*, V, pp. 276–8.
[53] Moniz, *Noticias*, I, pp. 275–6. [54] *SPD*, 10, p. 42.

territories.[55] Not surprisingly, relations between the Koli kingdoms and Maratha power remained persistently hostile through the eighteenth century.

Ramnagar Raj had, as we saw, sided with the Mughals in the seventeenth century, and in the lengthy negotiations that preceded that empire's recognition of Maratha dominance in the Peninsula, *Chhatrapati* (sovereign monarch) Shahu stipulated for the absolute control of the old kingdom of his grandfather Shivaji – and the lists of the latter's territories included Ramnagar-Ghandevi and Jawar – though interestingly, the fact that sub-divisional details could not be supplied for this tract, (unlike the other areas), strongly suggests that it had not been long under the direct administration of either Maratha or Mughal.[56] It was none the less claimed as part of the *swaraj*, (home territory) and in 1724 an officer, Satvoji Yadav was instructed that Jawar, Ramnagar, Vansda, and the sub-division Ghandivi 'were in the swaraj' and so he was to occupy and administer them, collecting all dues of every description.[57]

The implementation of this order would have effectively dispossessed the local rajas, and they resorted to their usual guerilla tactics. The chief of Jawar put up an especially effective resistance to the Marathas, and several years after the despatch of Satvoji Yadav, his successor Pilaji Jadhav was engaged in constructing a fort in the Jawar territory, and the men of Jawar were slipping into the Peshwa's territory in small parties and burning villages. Pilaji had evidently been reproved for allowing this, for he writes 'if five or ten men come by night and set fire to a village, what can the army do?'[58] The situation was aggravated, according to a slightly later report, by the covert assistance afforded to Jawar by Makhbul Alam, the Nizam's officer in the area. However, if Jawar remained recalcitrant, its rival Ramnagar agreed to pay tribute, but quickly fell into arrears.[59] The effort seems to have petered out after this, for we find the petty states of Jawar and Ramnagar still extant, practically independent and engaged in mutual strife in 1736–7. The ruler of the former had overrun and devastated the latter's territory, and occupied the capital, Dharampur, with an army of 500 horse and 1,500 foot, the latter being partly Kolis and partly mercenaries. The local Maratha official asked the Peshwa to act immediately in order to preserve Ramnagar from destruction, presumably so that it might

[55] *SPD*, 30, p. 59.
[56] G. C. Vad (ed.), *Selections from the Government Records in the Alienation Office: Treaties, Agreements and Sanads* (Bombay: P. V. Mawjee, 1914), doc.4.
[57] *SPD*, 40, pp. 1–2.
[58] *SPD*, 40, pp. 1, 4.
[59] *SPD*, 30, pp. 59–61.

continue to counter-balance the power of Jawar.[60] Thus the successors to Portuguese rule in the North Konkan also inherited their strategy.

In 1739 a large Maratha army came down to the coast with the object of finally destroying Portuguese power there, and the ruler of Ramnagar handed over four deserted and nine inhabited villages, which had earlier nominally been under Portuguese rule to the Marathas. At this time the territory seems to have been thinly inhabited, since even the sites of some villages could not be located, while, on the other hand four new villages were 'discovered'. Even the extant villages were small if the tax assessment of nine of them is any guide: it amounted to a total of just over ten *khandis* of rice (16,000 lbs.?) and 215 rupees.[61] Jawar promised to pay its tribute of Rs.1500 punctually.[62] The forest states were still taken seriously by other regional powers – only a few months later, the Maratha commandant at the fort of Gambhirgad reported that the Nizam's agents were striving to unite the Kolis and devastate the Peshwa's territory; but the eventuality did not materialise.[63]

The agreement with Ramnagar did not last long. At some point in the mid-1750s the Rana was compelled to surrender another sixty-nine villages and a share of transit duties.[64] This was preliminary to a fully-fledged war in the northern Konkan. The renewed efforts by the Peshwa Balaji Bajirao to assert his control over the western coast and mountains led to a temporary coalition of all the local chiefs to resist him. An alarmed Maratha official wrote towards the end of 1758 that Ramnagar, Jawar, Peth, and Surgana were all in revolt, incited thereto by the rana of Mandvi. 1,500 men had come from Nandurbar in Khandesh. Arms and ammunition were being supplied by the Portuguese of Damao, and 'the deceitful hat-wearers' of Bombay were probably also involved. Maratha garrisons were shut up in their forts, the standing crops were being destroyed and the peasants had fled.[65] In January 1759 Shankraji Keshav reported that the ruler of Ramnagar had then retired to Padola

> a forest difficult of access. We shall learn later what his further designs may be. If by chance, he collects the Kolis, then the rainy season is approaching; those forest folk will devastate the country. Let a letter from Court be sent to [another local ruler] Durjansingh, asking him to offer the Ramnagar raja a reciprocal abstention from hostilities ... If our army goes to Fatehpur, then the Kolis will not face us in battle – they will come through the forests and devastate our realm.[66]

[60] *SPD*, 40, p. 7; and *SPD*, 30, pp. 149–50.
[61] *SPD*, 40, pp. 8–9.
[62] *SPD*, 40, pp. 8–11.
[63] *SPD*, 40, pp. 10–11.
[64] *SSRPD*, 3, 1 p. 73.
[65] *SPD*, 40, pp. 99–100.
[66] *SPD*, 24, pp. 212–13.

In fact, the Kolis did raid as far south as Dahanu, plundering villages and burning the crops. Near Dahanu the raiders were confronted by local militiamen, who killed fifty or a hundred of them, and wounded a larger number; this preserved the rest of the country from devastation.[67]

The situation evidently alarmed the Peshwa, and he deployed the pick of his new regular infantry, who overran the region, the various rajas came to terms, and Ramnagar accepted the cession. The ceded villages were the more prosperous ones near the coast. The raj henceforth led a precarious existence in the backwoods of the Sahyadri mountains, paying *chauth* to the Pune government for its remaining lands.[68] Its survival depended on maintaining good relations with Pune, and when Nana Phadnis became the principal minister there, he was given an *inam* village in Ramnagar; one of four similarly bestowed to win favour at court.[69] These expedients as well as (perhaps) the poverty of his lands allowed him to live unmolested until 1797, when a levy of Rs.50, 000 was imposed – emboldened by the civil war then raging among the Maratha leaders, he evaded payment of the claim, and was probably protected by the newly arrived British *chauthia* from the wrath of Bajirao.[70] But enfeebling one forest polity opened a niche for others, so the Bhil chiefs of Khandesh began to move southwest into the political vacuum created by the Peshwa, and the Ramnagar ruler was unable or unwilling to check them. In 1805–6 the Bhils were raiding in the vicinity of Ramnagar fort, and all arrangements for the defence of the area were being coordinated from Pune.[71] Poverty and political insignificance led to the eclipse of the social pretensions of the line: so in the mid-nineteenth century, a Bombay official could write

> The Raja of Dhurumpoor is by descent a Rajpoot, though now almost reduced to the condition of a Bheel Chief. He is said to be of the Rhatore tribe, but without being able to adduce any proof of his genealogy. It is wholly unknown when and in what circumstances his ancestors first settled in this part of India.[72]

Jawar, though closer to the Maratha heartland, proved a more difficult nut to crack – probably because its kinship network tied it to the leading

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67 *SPD*, 24, pp. 216–17.

68 This payment was transferred to the British by the treaty of Vasai in 1803, and estimated at Rs.9000. *SRBG*, 26, p. 34.

69 *BISMT*, 21, 3 (1941), 266; *SSRPD*, V p. 166.

70 *SSRPD*, V pp. 166–7; n.68 above for the British receipt of *chauth*.

71 PA, Sanika Rumal 35, Pudke 7 – the number of this document is illegible; a photocopy is in my possession. It is a letter addressed by the Peshwa Bajirao to Trimbakji Dengle, dated 27 Ramzan Suhur year 1206.

72 *SRBG*, 26, p. 34.

families among the Sahyadri Kolis.[73] The state was overrun by Muzaffarjang's infantry towards the end of 1758.[74] The ruler however evidently resorted to the traditional strategy, retreated into the woodlands, and did not emerge until Muzaffarjang assured him of his protection and brought him in for negotiations. The Peshwa's brother, Sadashivrao suggested to that the Koli power be broken, and the opportunity taken to 'cut the Kolis' roots so that they could no longer trouble the realm.' He added: 'The Kolis are violent scoundrels, and they will remain so; they will not refrain from roguery in future – consider this fully and then act.'[75] None the less, the Pune court finally decided to play on family feuds within the lineage rather than take more extreme measures.

So the territory of Jawar was then taken over and administered by the regional Maratha official, and the Raja Krishnashah, two sons and retinue went off to serve as part of the garrison of the fort of Tryambak. One of his queens, Mohan Kuwar was allowed to adopt an heir named Patangshah and to have nominal charge of the state. Three *parganas* as well Jawar town and adjoining villages were now placed in the hands of the Rani. It was at this time that the total revenue was estimated at 7,000 rupees. She undertook to liquidate a debt of 12,000 rupees in five annual instalments – this itself indicates the smallness of the revenues. She was warned against maintaining a large armed following, and told that serious outbreaks would be dealt with by the Maratha forces posted at Jawar.[76] After serving for two years (until 1761?) the displaced Krishnashah rebelled again, and was killed in a family imbroglio; a Maratha administrator was appointed with effective control over the little territory, and the new ruler warned not to employ more than ten or twenty soldiers in his guard, and not to inflict punishments on refractory Kolis – that would be done by the resident official. It is evident that the object was to prevent the titular ruler from acquiring any real political influence. In 1762–3 Rudraji Vishwanath was appointed to the post, and informed that the Raja was master 'in name only', and that Rudraji should ensure that all the Kolis remained obedient to the Pune court.[77]

Another Rani, Abai, evidently rival to Mohan Kuwar, was imprisoned in Thana until released by the British who captured the place in 1780 in the course of their war with the Marathas. The British paid her an allowance because her family 'was formerly of a good deal of Conse-

[73] A. Mackintosh, 'An Account of the Tribe of Mhadeo Kolis', *Transactions of the Geographical Society of Bombay*, 1 (1837), 72 mentions 'Raj Koli' as sub-division of the community who claimed ties of kinship and service with the Koli rajas.
[74] *SPD*, 40, pp. 102–3.
[75] *SPD*, 40, pp. 115–6.
[76] *SSRPD*, 3, 1, pp. 73, 155; ibid., 9, 1, p. 264.
[77] *SSRPD*, 9, 1, pp. 263–4, 245–6.

quence in this Country, and she still keeps up some Correspondence with the Cooleys of the Hills ... '[78] They were correct in anticipating that she would be able to mobilise many Kolis on their side, and even after peace was made between the Pune court and the British government in 1782, she was able to sustain a guerilla war in the Konkan. Ultimately, the Peshwa's government was compelled to reach an agreement with her – she received a pension to sustain her and her retinue of over 100 soldiers, as well as a tax-free village in which to reside.[79] Meanwhile, Vikramshah succeeded Patangshah in Jawar in 1792, on the same terms as his predecessor, the Maratha official in charge being Pandurang Dhondaji.[80] Thus the kingdom of Jawar maintained a token existence into the colonial period. However, neutralising the ruling house did not mean that the Kolis as a whole had been disarmed, and a British report of 1823 noted that raids continued, and most of the population of the interior hills were 'Kolees and other jungle tribes' most of them 'armed with bows and arrows, spears, or matchlocks'. The dread that they inspired in the ordinary Konkanis was responsible for the limited extent of cultivation in both Jawar and adjoining districts.[81]

Given the local topography and climate, this would preserve large areas of modified woodland eminently suited to act as refuge for enterprising chiefs who might choose to supplement its limited resources by levying tributes from the settled lands beyond its boundaries – and the above-noted incursions of the Bhils into the Kolwan may have represented an attempt to exploit this strategic possibility. Only the arrival of the British prevented a fresh cycle of state-formation in the tract.

Forest states: strategies and dangers

The narrative that we have pieced together produces several elements of an understanding of these forest polities. To begin with, that they were aware of, and exploited the strategic inaccessibility of their lands. For them, the forests were not a refuge, but a base for tribute collection. Though unable to face the full strength of larger agrarian powers when it was deployed against them, the forest peoples had the capacity to deny their enemies the fruits of victory, both tactically and strategically: tactically in that their mobility and local knowledge allowed them to escape from disadvantageous situations; and strategically in that their

[78] *Bulletin of the Maharashtra Department of Archives*, no. 3 (1968), 25.
[79] *SSRPD*, 6, 2, pp. 104–5.
[80] *SSRPD*, 5, p. 163.
[81] *SRBG*, 26, p. 15.

capacity to terrorise the agrarian population and damage the bases of production made mere military victories sterile and valueless, as the Portuguese, for example, found. However, the price of invulnerability was underdevelopment, or, to use a less loaded term, a functional simplification of the material and productive equipment and social structure of the communities. The development of towns, arbours, orchards, fields – all laid them open to matching reprisals from exterior powers, and weakened them in the armed negotiations by which their rights were defined and enforced. Extended conflict led to flight of the meek and the recruitment of the militant, to the abandonment of villages and the regrowth of secondary woodland. Peace eroded this habitat.

On the other hand, the very successes of bold chiefs and notable leaders encouraged stratification with the concomitant tendency to abandon forest life for that of a petty court, perhaps sheltered in a suitable hill-fort. The hazard of such a course lay not only in greater vulnerability, but also in the processes of acculturation fostered by mercenary soldiers and more mercenary priests, and by the orientation to a provincial or imperial court. The latter, especially if accompanied by claims to superior, exotic origin, would, as with Ramnagar, tend to cut off the links to the militant communities of the forest, and ultimately enfeeble the state. At that point, it would need to draw on the support of foreign mercenaries and imperial subsidies. It was probably this process that led to decision of Bahirji of the kingdom of Baglan to exchange his mountain independence for Sultanpur as *watan jagir* and life as a Mughal *mansabdar* in 1638. This in turn would effectively remove the lineage as a political force in its original territory, and tie its fortunes to those of the supra-regional empire that it had chosen to follow. Successful imperial expansion might allow a client to found a new kingdom in some other region, as suggested, for example, in the offer made by Rao Karan of Bikaner in 1655 to conquer Jawar if it was granted him as hereditary possession.[82] But such ventures could also fail. Little more than a generation after Bahirji's enrolment, his son converted to Islam and exchanged his untenable estate in Sultanpur for Paunar in Vidarbha, and the family lost even that as the resurgent power of the Marathas and Gonds eroded Mughal control in the region. Meanwhile, as we saw, the forest returned to the cover the original lands of his family.

But then new little kingdoms began to take shape in the terrain earlier developed by the Baglan raj, and we have seen how they fared under the later Mughals as well as the expanding Maratha imperium. The latter, it

[82] Sarkar, *Aurangzib*, I, p. 209.

will be noticed, preferred a strategy of indirect rule, but ultimately took over the administration of both Jawar and Ramnagar. But this did not solve the problem. Outbreaks continued, and the Bhils began to expand into the sylvan strongholds left vacant by the neutralisation of Ramnagar, Peth and Jawar. Only the arrival of the British aborted the new cycle of state formation in the forest marches.

4 The peoples of the Sahyadri under Marathas and British

Introduction

The processes that we have described in the Baglan hills and the north Konkan occurred more intensively in the relatively narrow strip of mountains that separate the Dakhan plateau from the lowlands along the west coast. The Sahyadri range not only separated the rich trading ports, paddy fields and coconut groves of the Konkan from their markets inland, but its narrow valleys offered abundant and controllable sources of irrigation both for arable farmers and for specialist horticulturists. Meanwhile, the numerous steep but flat-topped mountains provided natural refuges for the lords whose power was based not only on the taxes of the peasantry and but also on resources garnered by raiding and trading in the plains to the east and west. The size of their take may be gathered (among other things) from the amounts invested in building the scores of hill-forts that crown almost every suitable peak in the western mountains. The Sultans of the Dakhan found it convenient to term them *deshmukhs*, but in their own estimation they were rajas.

Centralising courts soon found that they were best managed by playing them off against each other – so a late sixteenth-century document records that a particular fiefdom had its origins in 1426 in the fact that a rebellious chief had entrenched himself within the Bhivar valley and none of the nobles of the Sultan's court dared to go against him; then the ancestor of the Savant *deshmukhs* offered to do so, successfully overcame him and was awarded the *deshmukhi*, as well as a quarter of the revenues of the area.[1] Similarly, the Javli kingdom of the Mores was said to have been founded by a servant of the Bijapur Sultan, who killed a great tiger in the latter's presence, and was then rewarded with forested lands troubled by the depredations of tigers. He ousted refractory local chiefs and founded a little kingdom which lasted into

[1] *SPD*, 31, p. 1.

Shivaji's times.[2] Nor, indeed was the anonymous sultan the last to resort to such expedients: in 1765 one Dongarkhan (possibly a Bhil chief elsewhere pejoratively termed Dongrya Vesava) was being commissioned by the Peshwa Raghunathrao to seize lands in Surgana and in the northern Satpura hills, with the promise that half the conquest would be assigned to him.[3] These chiefs were the men described by Sabhasad (1694) who built themselves strongholds, collected taxes at will from the countryside, and paid only nominal sums to the central treasury; if the finance minister demanded an increase, they prepared to defy him.[4] Many such men rose to play important roles in the politics of the sultanates – for example Sabaji Koli in the sixteenth century, Lakhuji Jadhavrao and Shahji Bhosle in the seventeenth. Others, like Shivaji's antagonists, the Mores of Javli, were content to consolidate local domains where they dwelt in royal splendour, scarcely affected by events at the remote courts of their nominal sovereigns. The basis of their power remained, at bottom, armed followings and fiscal resources. The former had to be drawn from men accustomed to the hills and unafraid of the forests – swidden-farmers, hunters and herdsmen. Many of these were no doubt happy to supplement or replace the yield of their fields and flocks with the more honourable profits of soldiering. Equally, the protection of the forts, and the patronage of their holders, would draw farmers, artisans and traders into the valleys, and provide taxes and labour to the chiefs. In many cases, the immigrants might be refugees from climatic stress or political turmoil in the plains: for instance, the Thakur community of the Sahyadri had a tradition that they had fled from the Godavari valley into the forests, and thrown their weapons into a tank at Borli, above the Thal pass, in token of their abjuring warrior status (and accepting subordination?).[5] Thus, in times of peace, socially stratified and ethnically mixed communities would grow up in the valleys, reproducing in miniature the social system of the *desh* in the *mavals*. Times of strife would once again lead to the flight of the meek and the recruitment of the militant, and thorn forest would reclaim abandoned fields and ungrazed meadows.

This chapter will commence by looking at the politics of identity in the period of turmoil as the rising power of the Marathas under Shivaji (d.1680) and his successors contended with the waning Mughal empire ruled by Aurangzeb (d.1707). The gradual retreat of the Mughals was followed by the rise of Pune as the Brahman-dominated centre of Maratha power, and we then examine the interaction of the social and

[2] *Itihasa Sangraha*, 1, 10–11 (1914–15), 25–7.
[3] *SSRPD*, 9, 1, p. 41.
[4] B. R. Kulkarni (ed.), *Sabhasad Bakhar* (Pune: Anmol Prakashan, 1987), pp. 25–6.
[5] Chapekar, *Thakurs of the Sahyadri*, p. 3.

military strategies of this regime with the dominant communities of the Sahyadri forests. The social and political effects of the transition to colonial rule are the subject of the next three sections, and the chapter ends with a consideration of the subordinate communities of the region.

From Mavle to Rajput to Koli: politics and identity in the Sahyadri ranges

The Maratha regime that came to predominate in Peninsular India during the eighteenth century had its origins in the skilful strategic use of this terrain, and recruitment of those who knew it. Shivaji, its founder, gradually built up a strong base in the mountains and narrow wooded valleys of the Western ghats, a base that enabled his successors to withstand the concentrated efforts of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb to subdue them for twenty-five years. The most spectacular triumph of his early years – the destruction of a strong army headed by Afzal Khan – was, in large measure, due to his skilfully luring the enemy into a narrow valley in the mountains.[6]

Many of the local chiefs joined Shivaji, and others were subdued. Shivaji, while intolerant of rival claims to suzerainty, knew that his strength lay in mountains and jungles, and in the loyalty of their inhabitants. He recruited thousands of men from among the people of the mountains – the *mavalis* or westerners.[7] As early as 1646, the Vazir (chief minister) of the Bijapur sultan was warning Dadaji Naras Prabhu of the Rohida valley against assisting (the then sixteen-year old) Shivaji who was in revolt and collecting *mavali* followers. Dadaji's father was alarmed by the Vazir's threats, and Shivaji was quick to reassure his adherent, assuring him that this was empty bluster as 'Rohideshvar, the original presiding deity of your valley, who exists in self-created [*svayambhu*] form next to the *shendri* tree on the plateau at the crest of your peak has assured me success . . .'[8] Local patriotism, rootedness – these were clearly being invoked by the youthful Shivaji in order to encourage his wavering adherents. Throughout his career, he continued to gather *mavale* infantry; at the end of his reign, according to the contemporary chronicler Sabhasad, they numbered 100,000 men, commanded by thirty-six chiefs.[9] This round number is obviously an

[6] Setumadhavrao Pagdi, *Shivacharitra* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 1989), pp. 32–3.
[7] Viewed from the plateau, the sun sets (*mavalto*)in the western mountains, and these, and their valleys came to be called the *mavals*; hence the inhabitants were *mavli* or *mavle*. Their successes under Shivaji gave early currency to their name, though the later predominance of cavalry in the Maratha armies led to a renewed currency of 'Maratha'.
[8] *MIS*, 15, p. 272.
[9] Kulkarni (ed.), *Sabhasad Bakhar*, p. 91.

estimate, but it is very likely that heavy drafts on the man-power of the Mavals would have been a consequence of the half-century of warfare in the western mountains that accompanied the rise of Maratha power.

Mavlis were also recruited by Shivaji's enemies as their worth was proved, [10] and many evidently made their careers as infantrymen, just as the Berads were doing further south. As the struggle around the hill-forts intensified in the 1680s, we find the Mughal government ordering the recruitment of Mavali infantry (*pyadeha-i qaum mavli*), while the Maratha Chhatrapati Sambhaji blocked their exit from the Sahyadri valleys.[11] It is likely that any hillman who presented himself before a recruiter at this time would be snapped up without too many questions. There is some evidence that the Mavlis also began to appropriate a label well-known in the military labour market – that of Rajput. An early record is an intriguing letter written by Shivaji's government in 1662 and addressed to the 'Rajput' *deshmukhs* of the Rohidkhore valley.[12] Clearly, the arrival of Rajputs in the Mughal train had impressed southern warriors generally that this was an identity worth acquiring – the flavour of the century, so to speak. So, in the early eighteenth century the Mughal official Bhimsen recorded the tradition that the twelfth-century king Jaichand of Kanauj had conquered the south, and left his Rajput soldiers there, from whom the local Rajiwar community was descended.[13]

The Maratha rulers were willing, perhaps obliged, to accommodate similar claims; in 1681 King Sambhaji addressed the Koli tribal soldiers of the garrison of Prachandgarh as 'Rajputs'.[14] A few years later the British in Bombay decided to recruit a guard of 'Rajpoots', 'men selected from the countries not subject to the Mogul, to Sambajee, or to the Portuguese' – a stipulation that would certainly rule out a northern origin.[15] The wars also gave the hill soldiers opportunities to play one

[10] Jagdish Narayan Sarkar (ed. and trans.), *The Military Despatches of a Seventeenth-Century Indian General* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1969), p. 50.

[11] G. H. Khare (ed.), *Aitihasika Farsi Sahitya – Sahava Khand* (Pune: BISM, 1973), p. 207.

[12] *BISMT*, 10, 3 (1929), 119. Similarly some members of a judicial assembly gathered at Dhaniv in the Kanadkhore valley in 1666, identified themselves as 'Rajput' e.g. one Mallinga. *MIS*, 16, p. 38.

[13] Khobrekar (ed.), *Tarikh*, p. 197.

[14] *MIS*, 20, p. 395. The letter of 1681 begins by stating that the Kolis and Metkaris (perhaps Mahars), of the garrison live below the fort and their cows have been exempt from grazing tax; now each 'havaldar [officer], nayakvadi, and Rajput' was permitted also to graze two buffaloes free of tax. Now, according to Sabhasad (who wrote in 1694), the havaldar was the senior fort commander, and the nayakvadis were probably Berads, so 'Rajput' must refer to the rank and file of the garrison, already identified as Kolis. Kulkarni (ed.), *Sabhasad Bakhar*, p. 21.

[15] *SRBG*, 64, compiled 1814, cites records of 1683–4, p. 17.

side against the other. At the high point of Mughal success, soon after the capture and execution of the Chhatrapati Sambhaji, the latter's successors, isolated in the far south, could only admonish and persuade their wavering supporters in northern Maharashtra to continue the struggle with the Mughals. Shivaji's attempt to reduce the authority of the local gentry had also to be abandoned – the Chhatrapati Rajaram issued letter after letter restoring or enlarging patrimonial claims retrenched by his father.[16] Peasant militiamen settled in the valleys and forests of the strategic western mountains also had their status upgraded. The Chhatrapati Shahu was released from Mughal custody in 1707, came to Satara and became involved in a complex struggle to increase his power *vis-à-vis* alternative claimants to kingship based at Kolhapur. The landed militia of the Javli area would be important in this conflict, and are described as 'Rajput' in an order granting them a tax-reduction on their service (*mukasa*) lands.[17]

The hillmen's reputation as soldiers survived into the eighteenth century – in 1759, Appaji Hari, posted at the hill-fort of Dhodap, was instructed to recruit locally 'Kolis, Nayakvadis, etc; see that they are good, warlike men ...'[18] It is, however, possible that Mavlis took less readily to firearms than the Berads, and were therefore less useful outside their mountains. This is suggested by a letter of 1739, in which the Peshwa specifically asked for 300 picked Mavlis to be sent for secret enterprise (an escalade?), but added that they should conceal their swords and dress '*like musketeers*', or their arrival would become known.[19] It is noticeable that the regional identity of Mavli gradually drops out of use in the later eighteenth century, with local *jati* groupings such as Koli, Mahar, Thakur etc. becoming more common. This may be connected with a tendency to replace these locally rooted soldiers with peripatetic mercenaries, often of foreign origin. It may also reflect the re-emergence of occupational hierarchy in the Sahyadri as cultivation was restored, and village society and its hierarchies re-established.[20]

Social downgrading appears to have accompanied this process of military marginalisation. In 1760 we find a common slave-woman belonging to the state having to undergo purification after having drunk water from the hands of a Koli woman in the forest near Ramsej fort.[21]

16 Wink, *Land and Sovereignty*, pp. 182–3; *SPD*, 31, p. 47.
17 *SPD*, 7, pp. 26–7.
18 *SSRPD*, 3, 1, p. 155.
19 *SPD*, 30, pp. 172–3.
20 As early as 1738, for example, an active effort was being made to recruit Arab soldiers for the Peshwa – the official responsible reporting that they were hard to find. *SPD*, 12, pp. 85–6.
21 PA, Parasnis Transcripts, 9, p. 327.

Perhaps it was not coincidental that this order was issued during a costly war against the Koli guerillas from the petty state of Jawar, who were allied with various Koli leaders of the Sahyadri range.

Struggles for dominance: clearance, acculturation and settlement in the Sahyadri

But the military communities of the Mavals would not acquiesce quietly to being marginalised and reduced to ordinary *raiyats* (subjects/peasants). With the early eighteenth century re-establishment of political authority and urban life in the plains, trade and agriculture once again began to penetrate the western mountains. Many of those newly risen to wealth and power at Pune and Satara were from the Konkan, and so there was necessarily a more active movement of people and goods through the passes of the Sahyadri. Equally, there was a larger demand for luxuries like fine rice or sugarcane that could most easily be produced in the well-watered lands lying immediately east of the high ranges, and there was probably a similar increase in demand for luxuries of popular consumption, such as goat's flesh and ghee, consequent on the renewed prosperity of the Maratha *desh*. So for example, when the Peshwa Bajirao gave 175,635 meals to Brahmans in 1809, fine rice (Ambemohar variety) had to be purchased from the Maval region for them.[22] There was increased local demand for the services of specialists such as Govinda, a goldsmith who went and settled in the village of Nigde in the Nanemaval, and (in 1774) had the misfortune to be kidnapped by a band of Koli insurgents who detained him for seven days making silver bracelets for them (and thus perhaps destroying evidence of their depredations).[23] Furthermore, the resettlement of the plains, and the prosperity of urban centres in western Maharashtra created new economic opportunities and led to the immigration of tradesmen and gentry into the western mountains, leading to conflicts over territory and dominance. The early nineteenth-century account by Mackintosh, for example, repeatedly mentions the Kolis' assertions that immigrant graziers and others were usurping hereditary posts that should belong to them. He also recorded many complaints against the merchants who were settled in the bigger villages.[24]

The Mavli militia also still possessed their basic resource – high hills, dense forests and numerous strongholds – and these were quite as much an obstacle to the cumbersome cannon and linear formations of the new

[22] PA, Rojnishi section, Rumal 174, see *Shravanmasa ucchhaha.*
[23] PA, Sanika Rumal, 13, Pudke, 5, no. 13679.
[24] Mackintosh, 'Mhadeo Kolies', pp. 87–90; for traders, see pp. 245–7.

infantry as they had been to the chargers of the Mughal cavalry. Furthermore, even after Arabs or Gardis replaced the Mavli swordsmen of Shivaji's day and the Ramoshi naiks of Rajaram's retinue, the hillmen of the Sahyadri were still politically important. Pune, the Peshwa's capital, was an unwalled town close to the western mountains, and dependent for its security on the adjacent hill-forts, notably Purandhar. These forts had long drawn their garrisons from peasant warriors in the adjacent villages – so the militant communities of the mountains were strategically placed to pressurise the Pune government, to resist marginalisation and to assert their local dominance. One strategy they adopted was to dominate the countryside and assert hereditary control of crucial fortresses. The abundant documentation available for Purandhar allows us to trace this strategy over almost two centuries.

This hill-fort was held in the early seventeenth century by the Adilshahi kings of Bijapur, but was in fact in the hands of Mahadaji Neelkanthrao, a Brahman owing a nominal allegiance to them. According to the Sabhasad *bakhar* (written in 1694) Neelkanthrao's death in the mid seventeenth century was followed by quarrels among his sons, and Shivaji, having entered the fort in order to settle the dispute, imprisoned the disputants and added the fort to his dominions.[25]

An eighteenth-century account evidently written by a knowledgeable member of the family adds a substantial amount of detail, which we may accept as it conforms to what we may infer from fragmentary contemporary documents.[26] The narrative describes how most of the Pune region came under the control of Shahji Bhosle, Shivaji's father, who, however left for the Karnatak. The Kolis and Mahars in the vicinity of Purandhar became powerful, blocked the roads and prevented supplies from reaching the fort. Most of the garrison deserted, and only a few men from nearby villages remained. Mahadaji Neelkanthrao then resorted to diplomacy, and recruited four Koli leaders – Tamhane, Kalkud, Dhagare and Misal – and appointed them to the command of various outposts and gates of the fort. Shivaji having come of age began to contend with the Adilshahi sultan, and the fort was again isolated. The Koli chiefs however kept it provisioned by raiding the countryside. Growing powerful they demanded and obtained deeds of office rendering their posts hereditary. The Begle Mahars were warlike men, allies of the Kolis – they were also employed and assigned a post outside the

[25] Kulkarni (ed.), *Sabhasad Bakhar*, p. 4.

[26] In 1642 Rajshri Neelkanthrao Raje issued an order for the restoration of certain orchards and lands to a Brahman of Jejuri, indicating that he possessed a considerable independent jurisdiction in the western part of Pune district. D. V. Potdar and G. N. Mujumdar (eds.), *Shivacharitrasahitya* (Pune: BISM, 1930), II, pp. 170–1.

southern gate. The Tamhane line died out, and their employees, the Chivhes were then appointed to the vacant chiefship. Mahadaji died, and Shivaji took over the fortress. However, Mahadaji's sons were allotted some tax-free lands in several villages, and the seniormost kept the title of *Sarnaik* or *Sarnaikvadi*. Shivaji appointed Baji Gholap commandant, and put the lands within the circuit (*ghera*) of Purandhar in his charge. The Kolis and Mahars were retained in the outposts, but Shivaji's regulars made up the garrison. The fort was ceded to the Mughals in 1666 but recovered by Shivaji a few years later. (It was surrendered to Aurangzeb in the period after the capture and execution of Shivaji's son Sambhaji in 1689, and from the fact that the narrative silently skips these periods of Mughal occupation one may infer that the Neelkanthrao family was in fact reinstalled under Mughal auspices.) In the time of turmoil after 1689 (the narrative resumes) Trimbak Shivdev was left without men and had to introduce the Begle Mahars into the main fort. 'None of the Kolis was in the fort.'[27]

In fact, this was because they were negotiating with Sambhaji's successor Rajaram (1689–1700) who was exhorting several Koli chiefs to retake the stronghold on his behalf. So, in 1691 Chhatrapati Rajaram wrote to Ramji Naik Chivhe, Jankoji Naik Chivhe, Savji Patil, Tulaji Naik Dhagare, Tukoji Naik Kalkuda, 'all the Kolis' (*samast Koli*), and to Khandoji Misal, all of Purandhar, saying that they had offered to retake the fort, but had requested that in that event they should be granted the right to cultivate (tax-free?) within its circuit. This was promised them on oath to the resident deity of Purandhar.[28] This demand shows that the Kolis were both soldiers and cultivators at this time. However, the enterprise came to nothing, since Mughal officers continued to use Purandhar as a base as late as 1703.[29] It finally fell into Maratha hands after Aurangzeb's death, probably at the initiative of the Chivhes, for we find that lineage firmly ensconced in the garrison in the 1730s, and engaged in a dispute over the post of *sarnaik* with the Neelkantharao family. It is probably at this time that a palpably forged transcript of an alleged copper-plate was prepared in order to strengthen the claims of the Chivhes. According to this document, Essoo Naik Chooha (Chivhe) and Bhyrjee Naik arranged for the son and daughter-in-law of the latter Naik to be buried alive in the foundation of a new bastion at Purandhar, whose completion was prevented by the wrath of the spirit of the hill. This sacrifice appeased the deity and the bastion was completed. Essoo

[27] S. N. Joshi and G. H. Khare (eds.), *Shivacharitrasahitya* (Pune: BISM 1933), III, pp. 2–6 gives several important documents relating to this affair.
[28] *SPD*, 31, p. 47.
[29] Khobrekar (ed.), *Tarikh*, p. 235.

Naik then also defeated an enemy of the Bidar Badshah, and subsequently killed a tiger in the king's presence. By these acts he secured royal favour, and the King then called 'both Dummul Pant and Beerbul' and instructed them to prepare the copperplate recording the grant of the *sarnaiki* of the fort of Purandhar as well as lands totalling 6, 030 *bighas* in various villages, with the stipulation included that 'the tribe of Kolies alone may continue entitled to it, and that no other may interfere with it . . .'[30]

The dispute continued for several decades, and we have a letter of 1740 in which an official reports that Chahuji, Mahimaji and other delegates from the Purandhar garrison were dissatisfied, and were considering the option of not returning to the fort (and presumably taking to the hills as outlaws). The officer had agreed to forward their complaints to Chimnaji Appa, the Peshwa's brother, and adopted a conciliatory stance. Chahuji had stayed behind and the remaining delegates gone back to the fort, saying that if they were punished when they got there, the result would not be good.[31] The resistance to central authority evidently simmered on even after whatever settlement Chimnaji Appa may have decreed, and came up anew following the death of the Peshwa Balaji Bajirao in 1761. A dispute broke out over the succession to the Peshwaship, the Nizam of Hyderabad sought to reassert his power in the Peninsula and the unquiet folk of the western mountains came once more into the world of high politics.

In 1763–4 uprisings in the vicinity of Rajmachi in the Maval district were serious enough for troops to be despatched there.[32] Meanwhile, trouble was also brewing at Purandhar. The garrison there had developed a close attachment to Gopikabai and her son Madhavrao – a claimant to the Peshwaship, who was temporarily displaced from power by his uncle Raghunathrao in 1762. The latter decided to tighten his hold on the government, and placed two of his adherents – Sakharampant and Aba Purandare – in charge of Sinhgad and Purandhar respectively. But the Kolis and Berads of Purandhar viewed themselves as *watandars*, and refused to accept their new commander.[33] G. S. Sardesai also suggests that they may have been encouraged in their resistance by

[30] The translation of this document was published by Mackintosh, 'Ramossies', *Madras Journal*, 8 (July 1835), 244–6. 'Dummul Pant' is probably a reference to Damaji Pant, who was said to have distributed grain out of the State storehouse during the famine of 1396–1408, while Birbal was a courtier of the Mughal Emperor Akbar who reigned from 1556 to 1605!

[31] *SPD*, 30, pp. 191–2.

[32] *SSRPD*, 9, 1, pp. 297–8.

[33] In 1765 the garrison was represented by Kondaji Naik and Baloji Naik, both surnamed Chivhe – descendants of the Chivhes commissioned to recapture it in 1691. *SPD*, 19, p. 31. A *watandar* was a person holding a patrimony, either office or land, or both.

Gopikabai. Thereupon, Aba Purandare dismissed all of them and appointed fresh men. The ousted garrison did not acquiesce in this; 400 men entered the fort ostensibly bringing thatching grass: a duty imposed on the surrounding villages. Once within the gates, they brought out their weapons and proceeded to seize control of the fort on 7 May 1764, killing four officers in the process. Five days later they took the fort of Rudramal. Interestingly, they appointed a Brahman, Visaji Kesava to superintend affairs within the fort. They also began to appropriate the state and private property deposited in the fort for safe-keeping; Raghunathrao had (in absentia) begun a ceremony in the fort temple – this was disrupted and the equipment seized. Finally, the garrison despatched horsemen and began to collect tribute from adjoining regions. Reproved for this, Kondaji Naik Chivhe wrote to the Peshwa: 'Then how is the master's fort to be safeguarded by us on empty stomachs?'; and demanded a years' pay and provisions.[34] The infuriated Raghunathrao despatched troops to punish the insurgents – unable to enter the fortresses, they began seizing the families of the insurgents, beating and maltreating the women and children, and burning villages.[35] The insurgents were quite aware of the tensions between uncle and nephew, and sent a delegation with protestations of loyalty to the camp of Madhavrao, then on the Mysore frontier. Raghunathrao's attempts at repression also failed to cow the insurgents, who had 'taken the tiger-hunters' oath', and he now decided (in Sardesai's view) to win over the garrison to his side by reinstating them. He wrote:

> You have served loyally from generation to generation; you have not been disloyal to your master ... when you were being thrown out, you captured the place. Then many wrongs were committed by you. Now knowing your loyalty all your offences are pardoned. You petitioned that in future the fort should not be given to Aba Purandare or to anyone else. This is granted. Be assured that, as in your forefathers' time, the fort will be under the direct control of the State. There is property – cash, jewellery, clothes etc. – belonging to both Purandare and the State in the fort, all of which is now belongs to the government. It is required, so make a full list and hand over the property.[36]

The effort to secure complete control of the State treasure also ultimately failed, and the settlement with the Purandhar garrison was only achieved in 1765 with the concurrence of Madhavrao – who was suspected, despite his denials, of having helped to foment the whole affair.

This episode illustrates both the *esprit de corps* of a long-established garrison community, the direct involvement of such forces in the high

[34] *SPD*, 19, pp. 26–7.
[35] The account so far has drawn heavily on G. S. Sardesai, 'Purandar Killyavaril Kolyancha Bandava', *BISMT*, 5 (1924–25), 24–8.
[36] Unpublished document cited by Sardesai, 'Purandar', 28.

politics of the Maratha regime, and the utilisation of rifts in the ruling house for the assertion of their claims by the leading clansmen among the hill communities. The settlement with this garrison did not end such conflicts. Troops had to be despatched to other forts in the Mavals, and insurgents apprehended when they attempted to seize the fort of Ratangad.[37] Turmoil apparently continued, and other Koli leaders maneouvred to secure positions of honour and privilege on par with the Chivhes. In 1769–70 we find the Peshwa Madhavrao writing to a local official:

> You reported that without granting two villages to the Bhangare, Bamble and Bokad [families of] Kolis a settlement with the Kolis is impossible; so if they serve obediently and faultlessly, without falling into any disorders, then give them a village yielding a revenue of four hundred rupees in Shivner taluka . . .[38]

It is not clear if an agreement resulted; if so, it was short-lived – new rifts in the ruling house created new opportunities for the Purandhar Kolis to assert themselves. The assassination of the Peshwa Narayanrao in 1773 was followed by complex intrigues, complicated by the appearance of an impostor who claimed to be Sadashivrao, brother of the Peshwa Balaji Bajirao. He gained many adherents in the Sahyadri region and a number of fortresses fell into his hands with surprising ease.[39] In a few months he held the whole country from Salsi and Vijaydurg on the coast upto Sinhgad in the mountains.[40] His appearance, and perhaps also the intrigues of Raghunathrao provided fine opportunities for the Kolis to enrich themselves and reassert their local dominance. In January 1776 a newswriter at the Peshwa's court reported that the Kolis were plundering villages in the Konkan and had taken several forts. The next month they appeared above the ghats, raided to within a few miles (five to seven *kos*) of Pune, and moved off towards Nasik. A body of 500–700 cavalry and 2,000 infantry had to be despatched against them. However when they attempted to levy tribute on the important town of Chas they were met by local troops as well as men from the army of Tukoji Holkar, and defeated. Fifty of them were captured and beheaded in February 1776.[41] The impostor's successes had been in large measure due to Koli support: during the campaign against him in 1775–6 the Pune government came to an agreement with 'Javji Naik Bakle, Santaji Naik Sirkande, Khod Bhangre, and all the Koli leaders'

[37] *SSRPD*, 9, 1, pp. 297, 300.
[38] *SSRPD*, 9, 1, p. 304.
[39] R. V. Hervadkar (ed.), *Peshvyanchi Bakhar* (Pune: Venus Prakashan, 1975), pp. 114–15.
[40] OIOC Mss Mar G 38 fos.149a-b is a near-contemporary narrative.
[41] This account of events in early 1776 is based on *Pune Akhbars* 3 vols. (Central Records Office, Hyderabad Government 1953), vol. I, pp. 4, 7, 9, 12.

that they would be pardoned if they surrendered the government posts that they had captured.[42]

Negotiations were evidently prolonged, because in March 1776 Jivaji Naik Bokad was awarded a village assessed at 200 rupees, and promised 3,000 rupees if he arranged the recapture of four forts – Sidhgad, Kothla, Gorakha and Bahiravgad. He was also to induce various absconding Koli chiefs (Santaji Silkande, Javji Ishta, Mayaji Dhamsa) to come and submit, and they were promised an amnesty if they did so. They would also be given robes of honour, and Jivaji was promised the use of a yak-tail fan, and an allowance of thirty rupees for a man to wave it.[43] These and other demands show that the Kolis were far from being naive children of the forest – they understood and participated in the honorific culture of the court as much as in its politics.

With so many risings among the Kolis, the Pune court evidently realised the importance of flattering and gratifying the Purandhar garrison. So a budget estimate for 1775–6, recorded that an agreement had been made in 1765–6 with the important chiefs in the fort, 'who are utterly loyal' and that they had been awarded various extra allowances and honours. Several members of the Chivhe clan headed by Kondaji Naik appear in the list.[44] As we shall see, despite this encomium to his loyalty, Kondaji did not lose his taste for high politics.

The British government of Bombay had long been envious of the rich pickings of their peers in Bengal and Madras, and thought that a quick stroke of *fitna* (seditious intrigue) would secure them a slice of the Maratha dominions in Gujarat and the Konkan in addition to the coastal lands that they had seized in 1774. So they decided to support the claims of Raghunathrao to the Peshwaship. War broke out, and the Mavals, lying as they did between Bombay and Pune, were once more a contested territory. Raghunathrao actively sought partisans who could harass the Pune government – in the south-east for example, encouraging the Berad Naik of Shorapur to seize the open country upto Pandharpur, and he also attempted to capture the Konkan forts.[45] Raghunathrao's own previous setbacks would have acquainted him with the capacities of the Kolis, and he evidently approached them; the capture of Purandhar, where the treasure, records and (often) the persons of his leading rivals were to be found,[46] would have been a

[42] *SSRPD*, 6, 2, p. 148. Bakle is evidently Bamle – in the Modi script the two letters are very similar.

[43] *SPD*, 31, pp. 134–5.

[44] *SPD*, 45, pp. 61–3.

[45] See documents in *BISM*, *Tritiya Sammelana Vritta*, p. 65n, p. 72; also Mackintosh, 'Mhadeo Kolies', p. 266; *MIS*, 12, p. 101.

[46] The infant Peshwa Madhavrao Narayan was born in that fort; and he and his entourage lived there for a substantial parts of the years 1774–79 – see *SSRPD*, 8, 3, pp. 359–62.

decisive stroke in his contest with the Pune court. A memorandum of 1777 records his promise to grant 'fourteen villages, four sets of pearl and gold double earrings, five neck ornaments, fourteen bracelets, one standard, three ornamented umbrellas and seven palanquins' to a number of Koli leaders provided they captured Sinhgad and Purandhar 'before the full-moon in (the month of) Falgun'.[47] This again indicates how the Kolis were completely integrated into the courtly culture and honorific economy of the day. However, the plot misfired, and Kondaji was arrested. A newsletter of November 1778 reported that the Naik had been fettered and imprisoned.[48]

It was perhaps in this period that Bhangare and associated families rose to prominence as counterweights to the Chivhes. Meanwhile the Bombay Government persisted with its effort to install Raghunathrao, a full-scale war broke out and both sides needed the support of the Kolis. Thus when the Maratha garrison in Malanggad ran short of supplies – especially tobacco – a group of Kolis managed smuggle them in through the British lines in November 1780.[49] The British, perhaps capitalising on the earlier alienation of the Kolis by the Brahman-dominated regime in Pune seem to have been more successful in gaining their support. Important fortresses, such as Gambhirgad and Segava were taken by Kolis in the British service during the campaign of 1780, while the Maratha commandant of Malanggad was lamenting the lack of hillmen in his forces, and reporting that the *gardi* soldiers were of little value in mountain forests.[50] Numbers of Kolis joined the British as auxiliaries and roamed the Konkan, denying revenue and supplies to the Maratha garrisons and keeping them in a state of alarm. So for example, Durgoji Shinde, commandant of Mahuli, reported in June 1781 that bands of fifty to a hundred Kolis were traversing the countryside, levying tributes and capturing Brahman adherents of the Government.[51] Maratha officials seem to have directed reprisals against the families of the insurgents, for the officers in fort Sidhgad received a threatening letter in November 1780 from the Koli chief Santaji Silkande, accusing them of harassing ordinary peasants and imprisoning their families, and warning them that he would not only take their lives, but also capture the families of the garrison and hand them over to the English.[52] Ultimately, the

[47] *Itihasa Sangraha*, 6, 4–6 (1914–15), 59–60.
[48] V. V. Khare (ed.), *Aitihasik Lekha Sangraha* 26 vols. (Miraj and Pune: the editor, 1901–26), VII, p. 3,361.
[49] M. R. Kantak *First Anglo-Maratha War: The Last Phase* [A collection of contemporary Marathi documents] (Pune: Deccan College 1989), pp. 86–7.
[50] Ibid., pp. 177, 71.
[51] Ibid., pp. 253–4.
[52] Ibid., p. 84.

Pune Government had to pardon Silkanda – a document of 1781–2 states that he had come to the Court and petitioned that if his earlier offences were overlooked he would behave loyally in future, and that his petition was granted.[53] This was how it was recorded in the 'Diary' of the Peshwa; a private memorandum enumerates the large concessions by which this submission was secured. These included a full pardon for past offences, the coveted right to use a palanquin, and the command of a contingent of 150 men. Gangadhar Ram Karlekar was to stand surety for their fulfilment. The Bokad family also benefited under the agreement. Arjunji Naik Bokad was to be granted the right to use a palanquin as his father had done.[54] A degree of peace was evidently secured by such concessions, and the newer lineages established in local office, eclipsing the older Kalkude and Chivhe families. At the same time, some Ramoshi families may have been promoted to counterbalance the Kolis. However, Koli power still remained local: the Maratha regime continued to draw on Arabs, Hindustanis and other outsiders for its infantry, and the Mavalis never regained their old importance.

Meanwhile, it seems likely that the forests along the western mountains were gradually being thinned, and peasant immigrants from the plains coming in to settle the lands.[55] The poorer Kolis may well have found their social status sinking when they could no longer supplement their agriculture with military earnings; and on the other hand, some of the wealthier men might have acquired horses and arms, and joined the irregular *bargir* horse of the Deccan.

The transition to colonial rule

Bajirao Raghunath's power had completely dissolved by late 1802 and he was compelled to put himself into the hands of the British; when restored with their support he attempted a vigorous programme of centralisation. Arab soldiers were despatched into the mountains to deal with a Koli insurgency, and the Ramoshis of Purandhar expelled from the fort as punishment for their refractory attitude. This may have led to greater reliance on Bhangare and some of the other Koli lineages: at any rate when the British finally ousted Bajirao in 1818, local police in the hills seems to have been in the hands of these naiks.

[53] *SSRPD*, 6, 2, p. 159.
[54] *Itihasa Sangraha*, 6, 4–6 (1914–15), 71–3.
[55] In the 1830s, when Mackintosh wrote his account of the Kolis, the process was fairly far advanced, and most villages had a mixed population. The later eighteenth century was generally a prosperous time, and it seems reasonable to suppose that settlement and clearance of the mountain fringes had begun at that time. Mackintosh, 'Mhadeo Kolies', pp. 86–90.

However, the social and political accommodation of the Kolis under the last Peshwa was challenged by the Bhils, who seem to have extended their range southwards along the hill ranges, and into the Konkan. So a document shows Babuji Bhamble having to campaign against them in the Kolwan – literally the Koli country – in 1797–8; slightly later (perhaps 1803?) a despatch from the fort of Mahuli in the Konkan reported that several thousand Bhils had gathered for an invasion of the coastal plain, and troops from its garrison had fought with them at Kharda in the uplands. The writers asked for the urgent supply of reinforcements and powder, warning that if the Bhils were not checked the entire province would be abandoned by the inhabitants. The despatch added that the Bhils were taking away the few stores of grain left after the previous years' crop-failure; and that failure may itself have been the immediate impetus for this Bhil attempt to expand their range to the south and east.[56] Reviewing the condition of the former Peshwa's territory in 1821, Mountstuart Elphinstone noted the geographical distribution of the rival communities:

> The northern part of the chain of ghauts [mountains], and the country at its base is inhabited by Beels. The Coolies, who somewhat resemble the Beels, but are less predatory and more civilized, inhabit the part of the range to the south of Baughhaud [*sic*. Baglan] and the country at its base on the west as far south as Basseen ... The Beels possess the eastern part of the range, and all the branches that run out from it towards the east, as far south as Poona; they even spread over the plains to east, especially on the north of the Godavry ...[57]

The British accepted this distribution of power, and as late as 1838, of seventeen chieftains controlling the local police in Ahmadnagar district, eleven were Bhils.[58]

Such chiefs would install watchmen in the villages, to be paid by the village community. Gooddine's careful survey of village dues in Ahmadnagar in 1845 found Bhil watchmen receiving dues in grain as well as holding tax-free land, the latter 'generally cultivated by the Patel, or some other resident of the village, who pays the Bheel a portion of its produce as rent'. The watchman employed his leisure in the more lordly and independent pursuit of hunting, and sometimes exchanged parts of his catch for grain.[59] Renting out the land to sharecroppers was also 'the general, and almost invariable custom' of the Ramoshis.[60]

The colonial regime began by attempting to maintain the extant police system in the teritories conquered from the Peshwa in 1818, and

[56] Sanika Rumal 26, Pudke 4, doc.14158 – no date; perhaps 1803.
[57] Elphinstone, *Report on the Territories Conquered from the Paishwa*, p. 2.
[58] Robinson, 'Adaptation to Colonial Rule', p. 23.
[59] *SRBG*, 4 (O.S.), p. 13 and note.
[60] Mackintosh, 'Rammoossies', *Madras Journal*, 3 (1834), 135.

therefore sought to reach working compromises with such peoples. Bhils had (as we have seen) established a substantial presence in northern Ahmadnagar, and so were admitted to such arrangements. For example, W. H. Sykes recorded in 1829 that the little town of Brahmanwadi on the high road between Junnar and Nasik had been repeatedly plundered by the Bhils and Ramoshis, but under 'the British since the arrangement with the Bheel Naiks, by which they were taken into Government pay and made responsible for certain districts, it has had a superior fate and been unmolested'.[61] The Bhils continued to challenge the local dominance of their rivals, the Kolis. Alexander Mackintosh, an experienced and knowledgeable police officer, writing in 1836 commented that

> [t]he Bheels put in a claim about six years ago for the [r]ukwalldarship of the Kotool district, which was of course rejected, and the hereditary Koly watchmen were re-appointed. The Bheels for many years past have been gradually encroaching and usurping from the Ramossies and Kolies the office of village watchmen. It would seem good policy to prevent the advance of the Bheels to the hilly country... The residence of those at present settled in the Ahmednuggur district is confined to the open country, and as they are a more hardy and robust people than the Kolies, and partake of all kinds of animal food, were they to secure a residence in the hilly country, the probability is, that it would be a more difficult matter to quell a disturbance among them than among the Kolies.[62]

South of Mehtarjee's jurisdiction therefore, similar powers and rights were entrusted to various Koli chiefs. So for example Rajoor and Malldesh were under the charge of Javji Bamble who employed forty men, as well as Bhangre of Sakurwadi and the Khari naik with fifteen.[63] Thus, as F. B. Robinson has pointed out, the 'wild tribes' were accommodated in the police apparatus of the early colonial state.[64] They none the less continued to be a source of anxiety to it. Reviewing the results of a census taken in 1845–46 the Governor of Bombay commented on the importance of knowing what proportion 'turbulent and predatory' groups such as 'the Kolees and Bheels of Goozerath and the Konkun, the Bheels of Khandesh, the Rammoossees and Mangs of the Deckun' bore to the whole population.[65] Those mentioned above had been in actual possession of various degrees of jurisdiction at the time of the British conquest, but bold and independent leaders could still establish or re-establish rights against the British, much as their

[61] OIOC Mss Eur D. 148 pp. 95–6.
[62] Mackintosh, 'Mhadeo Kolies', 272n.
[63] Ibid., 89.
[64] Robinson's pioneering work in this field deserves to be more widely known; see his 'Bandits and Rebellion in Nineteenth Century Western India', in A. A. Yang (ed.) *Crime and Criminality in British India* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985).
[65] Census of Bombay Presidency 1872, vol. II: *General Report* Appendix, p. 17.

predecessors had done against Sultan and Padshah, Peshwa and Chhatrapati. This is well illustrated by the famous case of Umaji Naik.

Umaji Raje: Mukkam Dongar

An early biography of Umaji was published by one of the police officers who pursued him, and he figures prominently in Robinson's fine study of early British relations with the 'wild tribes' – which study however, is wholly based on English sources. A new biography by Sadashiv Athavale in 1991 has made skilful use not only of English records, but also of a mass of hitherto unused Marathi documents.[66] This section is much indebted to the works of these authors, and especially to the collection of 116 documents printed in the Appendix to Athavale's book.

According to Mackintosh, the Ramoshis of Purandhar were expelled because they refused to surrender the fort to the Peshwa Bajirao Raghunath when he returned with British support in 1803. Their motives are unclear, but Umaji, at any rate, believed that his lineage had been deprived of important hereditary rights, and the effort to recover and extend these rights was the central element in his career.

Born in 1791, he was in his twenties when British rule was established in 1818, and became part of a robber gang shortly thereafter. A series of successful robberies and feats of hardihood elevated him to the leadership of his band on the death of Sattu Naik in 1825, and by 1827 his reputation was sufficiently great for the raja of Kolhapur, then in opposition to the British, to enter into an alliance with him. He was also able to levy contributions from many villages in Pune, the Satara kingdom, and the lands of the Pant Sachiv of Bhor.[67] Umaji also wrote threatening letters to the British authorities demanding recognition of his rights in accordance with the treaty and copperplate that he sent, otherwise where there was now one rebellion, there would be thousands, and the whole province from the Satpudas to the Konkan would be rendered desolate.[68] Conforming to the old principle of exploiting ethnic rivalries, the British employed the Kolis of Purandhar against him, giving a special charge to Balvantrao Chivhe of Purandhar in September 1827. The latter met with no success, and a month later another government order threw the field open to free-lance law-

[66] A. Mackintosh, 'A Sketch of the Life of the Ramoossy Chief Oomiah Naik Khomney of Poorundur', *The Madras Journal of Literature and Science*, 6 (1835); F. Bruce Robinson, 'Adaptation to Colonial Rule by the "Wild Tribes" of the Bombay Deccan 1818–1880'; and Sadashiv Athavle, *Umaji Raje: Mukkam Dongar* (Pune: Continental, 1991).

[67] Mackintosh, 'Ramoossies', p. 17.

[68] Athavale, *Umaji Raje*, App. p.126.

enforcement, stating that anybody who armed himself and joined Balvantrao in pursuit of the rebels would receive six rupees a month, and be allowed to retain any property seized from them. Subsequently, all Kolis were offered land worth six rupees (per year?) in perpetuity if they joined the campaign.[69] In reprisal Umaji burned the Koli village of Bhaironvadi near Purandhar to the ground in early November, and issued a proclamation warning that anybody who assisted the Kolis against him would be put to death.[70] Balvantrao's evident failure forced the government to turn to other Ramoshis for the capture of Umaji: for example, we find one Ranoji, son of Firangoji being promised the enormous gift of 480 *bighas* (400 or more acres) of land if he captured the rebel leaders. Shortly afterwards, it became necessary to rebuke him for taking supplies from the villagers without paying for them.[71]

Finally, all efforts to seize Umaji having failed, an agreement was made with him, and he was given the effective charge of the police for a large part of the Pune district, and soon set up an unofficial, but none the less powerful court at Sakurdy where he resided. As Mackintosh described it,

> Koonbies, Ramoossies, Mhars, Mangs and other persons of low caste, appeared before his tribunal for the redress of their grievances, and when they did not present themselves, on the circumstances of their complaint becoming known to him, they were in general summoned to Sakoordy: these people frequently came from the distance of fifteen, twenty-five, and thirty miles . . .
>
> It was customary for him to place under restraint such persons as resisted his judgement . . . In fact it may be said that the magisterial duties of the district around Jejoory, and part of the Indapoor Pergunna, were thus usurped by Oomiah.[72]

At the same time, Umaji revived his claims on hereditary assignments in the territories of the petty state of Bhor, but was rebuffed by the ruler of the state, who upon investigation reported that there was no evidence of such claims having been enjoyed in the past 100 years.[73] A similar conclusion as to the unfounded nature of his claims was also reached by the Collector of Poona, George Giberne in 1830. Meanwhile, Umaji began to supplement his resources and enlarge his following by sheltering robbers and taking a share of their booty. Although rumours of these activities are said (by Mackintosh) to have reached the British

[69] Ibid., pp. 134, 135–6. These citations are from a Marathi chronological summary of executive action *re*. Umaji which was prepared in the Pune Collector's office in January 1828, and has been printed in Athavale.
[70] Mackintosh, 'Ramoossies', pt.6, p. 18.
[71] Athavale, *Umaji Raje*, App. p. 138, 141–2.
[72] Mackintosh, 'Ramoossies', pt. 6, p. 34.
[73] Ibid., p. 195.

authorities at Pune, yet they probably preferred to ignore them rather than antagonise Umaji. However, they had to act when he proceeded to insult and threaten an English officer in public, and he was compulsorily settled in Pune city, and kept under a loose surveillance. His duties were handed over to his brother Krishnaji. After a few months Umaji fled from the city, and led a fresh uprising in the Sahyadri mountains. In this instance, however, the government, forewarned by previous failures, immediately allocated large resources to the suppression of the rising, and after an exhausting campaign lasting through most of 1831, succeeded in isolating Umaji, who was betrayed, captured and ultimately executed.[74]

The Khomnes continued to be men of standing even after (or indeed perhaps, because) Umaji Naik perished on the gallows. Tukya, son of Umaji was active during the uprising of Raghoji Bhangare in 1844–46, and in early 1845 led a group of men who wounded and mutilated some inhabitants of Bhivari. Accounts of his motives vary. One version was that this was because one of the victims had seduced the wife of a member of his gang, while another was that it was because the villagers had informed on the perpetrators of a dacoity. Both these motives may have been present.[75] The family reputation would help the Khomne clan in various ways; for example, late as 1854, when such arrangements had been officially discontinued, we find the headman of the village of Garade making an agreement with Umaji's brother Sayaji Naik to guard the village in return for the large reward of twenty *khandis* (15 tons?) of foodgrain and fifty rupees cash.[76] And Umaji's heirs preserved the papers and letters on which he had based his claims to extra fees and emoluments until well into the twentieth century.

After the 1828 agreement with Umaji and his installation at Purandhar, other ambitious men also decided to test the new colonial regime. Among these were the Koli naiks of the Ahmadnagar district, several of whom assembled a following in the hills at the end of 1829 with the object of pressurising the government into restoring or enlarging their emoluments and land-grants.[77] However, a large force was deployed against them and actively supported by a large fraction of the population of the area, so that the rising was broken up and its leaders captured. Mackintosh writes that

[74] The fullest account is Mackintosh, 'Ramoossies', pt. 8, pp. 191–220; also Athavale, *Umaji Raje*, pp. 86–101.
[75] See OIOC, BJP 23 April 1845 P/403/42 Letter nos. 3027 and 3028.
[76] R. V. Oturkar, *Peshvekalina Samajik va Arthik Patravyavahara* (Pune: BISM, 1950), pp. 62–3.
[77] Robinson, 'Adaptation to Colonial Rule', pp. 224–6.

the inhabitants of the Kotool and Rajoor districts showed a very great desire to aid the troops in the service on which they were employed; and while acting independently, without any of our troops near, they seized a number of the Bund and brought them prisoners to camp.[78]

It is possible that non-Koli residents of the hills did not relish the prospect of a strengthening of Koli power. The British none the less continued to employ several of the Koli naiks, but they lived uneasily under this more autocratic and centralised regime, and often colluded with the outlaws and rebels in their charge while using their presence for leverage with the British authorities.[79] At least some British officials were aware of this, and pressed for closer supervision of the Kolis and Ramoshis by English officers modelled on the Bhil Agents of Khandesh. However this proposal was not implemented, and the Koli naiks largely left in charge of the mountains and passes in Ahmadnagar and Poona Collectorates.[80] John Malcolm was then Governor of Bombay, and his approval may have reflected his commitment to maintaining the hierarchies of indigenous society which he saw as endangered by British rule;[81] but it may equally have been prompted by the vigorous economy drive launched by the newly arrived Governor-General William Bentinck. Creating new appointments, however popular with aspirants for promotion, was costly – indigenous institutions had the virtue of cheapness. The post of Western Bhil Agent in Khandesh was abolished in 1827: but the risings in Poona and Ahmadnagar in 1844–45 were to used to alarm the parsimonious Bombay government into re-establishing it, and adding 200 men to the strength of the Bhil Corps.[82] The tactic of using local disorders to win or retain posts and emoluments was not confined to the Koli naiks or Ramoshi rakhwaldars.

Political competition to social banditry?

Gradually, agricultural settlements, roads (and later railways) and forest clearance contributed to the assimilation of the Kolis into the class of peasants with martial traditions, much like the Maratha Kunbis of the

[78] Mackintosh, 'Mhadeo Kolies', p. 279.

[79] See Robinson, 'Adaptation to Colonial Rule', pp. 245–6. He cites a contemporary official: 'At present it is to be feared that the Naiks rejoice and connive at any attempt to get up a Bund or insurrection, in the hope that Government will be compelled to make for them a more liberal provision.' Ibid., p. 269 n.70.

[80] Ibid., pp. 248–9 and notes.

[81] In a minute written in 1828, Malcolm strongly recommended that officers in Bhil units 'should be the heads of families and tribes, and we should preserve in their formation the ties and gradations which belong to the original community'. OIOC, BJP 20 Feb.1828 P/400/15 no. 6.

[82] OIOC, BJP P/403/41 no. 2461 9 April 1845.

open country. To W. H. Sykes in the early nineteenth century they were indistiguishable from the 'Maratha mountaineers' in their way of life, and by 1881, the *Poona Gazetteer* could record that many of those counted as Koli by the Census were, or chose to be, uncertain whether they were Koli or Kunbi.[83] When Mackintosh wrote in 1836 many villages had mixed populations and the Koli inhabitants were often at odds with those whom they characterised as newcomers. So for example, he noted that the 'Toory Koly, Patell of Tejoor, and the Koonby Patell Khurrad, are always quarrelling. The Koonby is accused of having come to the village jungle to graze his cattle, and by unfair means, to have usurped a share of the Patellship.'[84] Such disputes increased the power of district officials who were called in to adjudicate them, and broke up the unity and homogeneity of the hill communities. The dilution of the Mavle identity, and encouragement to *jati* categories that we noted in the late eighteenth century would also have contributed to this.

The Koli identity nonetheless persisted and they retained their militant reputation. Down to the mid-nineteenth century the policing of a substantial area was in the hands of different Koli naiks appointed by the colonial government. However, their powers were curtailed after they colluded with the famous Koli rebel Raghoji Bhangare, who successfully defied the government for two years (1844–46).[85] None the less, during the great crisis of 1857, the colonial regime turned to the Koli militia, and raised an irregular corps from among them to combat Bhil insurgents in Ahmadnagar and Nasik. It is noteworthy that recruitment utilised still extant social links, one Captain Nuttall 'dealt with the heads of the different clans, promising them rank and position in the corps corresponding to the number of recruits that they might bring'. Javji Naik Bamble headed the unit, and a brother of the famous Raghoji Bhangare was among the officers.[86] When the Forest Department began to press hard on the inhabitants of the Sahyadri in the early 1880s, at least some of them discussed the possibility of getting the Kolis to revolt to secure redress: violence was evidently seen as their special province. A scion of the Bokad family, Ganpatrao Malhar, then an Inspector of

[83] 'Kolis are returned as numbering 42, 829 and as found over the whole district. Most of them cannot tell whether they are Kolis or Kunbis and if Kolis to what class of Koli they belong.' *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency XVIII: Poona*, pt. 1, p. 389.

[84] Mackintosh, 'Mhadeo Kolies', 88–9.

[85] Raghoji's revolt has been extensively discussed in Robinson 'Adaptation to Colonial Rule' ch. 9, and more recently has been the subject of a fine study by David Hardiman, 'Community, Patriarchy, Honour: Raghu Bhangare's Revolt' *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 23 (1995).

[86] *Nasik Gazetteer*, p. 200.

Police heard 'that evilly disposed people of other castes were instigating them to rise'. By his account, he then used his influence as head of the clan to persuade them to assemble and draft a petition instead.[87]

Petitions and litigation now began to replace armed demonstration as the main method to secure redress of grievances, although the role played by Ganpatrao Bokad – chief of police and head of the clan – was not so widely different from that of his eighteenth century forebears. Still, the reputation of the Kolis as a turbulent folk survived, and when J. D. Atkins, Forest Settlement Officer, was confronted with their complaints of corruption in, and oppression by his Department, he retorted that the Kolis should have no forest grievances, and that their real grievances were that 'their occupation as hereditary dacoits is gone, and their ability to terrorise over the agricultural population and to levy blackmail is less than it was'.[88] Given the context, the truth of this statement is open to doubt, but its affirmation before a Commission of Enquiry suggests that such stereotypes were still held in official circles. Down to the beginning of the twentieth century, the mountain Kolis thought it advantageous to themselves if one or two gangs operated in the mountains, as it checked excessive demands on the part of moneylenders and restrained the abuses of forest guards. Furthermore, they judged that a 'reputation for being easily excited to outlawry and crime, secures for them, a poor unrepresented hill tribe, attention, consideration and concessions from Government which otherwise they would be unlikely to secure'.[89] Periodic outbreaks maintained their reputation down to the mid twentieth century.[90] They also checked the activities of moneylenders. For example in 1948 a crowd led by members of the Communist Party sacked the shops of Gujar merchants in Khirvihre village and burned their account books. 'It is generally agreed in the area that since then the Gujar merchants have been behaving in a fair manner.'[91]

The Kolis also remained dominant among the communities on both sides of the Sahyadri range down to the mid twentieth century. Kamalu Padir, an elderly Thakur assessed them in the 1940s: 'The Koli is clean and brave. He is a dacoit and the Thakur is afraid of him.'[92] The sense of their own superiority led to protests when a Thakur student was admitted to student hostel occupied by Mahadeo Kolis in 1924 (though

87 Evidence of Ganpatrao Malhar Bokad, 30 January 1886, in *Report of the Bombay Forest Commission* (Bombay Govovernment Press, 1887), II, pp. 42–3.
88 Ibid., II, p. 254.
89 Government of Bombay, *Notes on the Criminal Classes in the Bombay Presidency* (Bombay Government Press, 1908), p. 96.
90 Hardiman, 'Raghu Bhanagre's Revolt', pp. 121–4.
91 G. S. Ghurye, *The Mahadev Kolis* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1963), p. 215.
92 Chapekar, *Thakurs of the Sahyadri*, p. 158.

the management successfully weathered the storm).[93] Similar sentiments still existed in 1991 when David Hardiman was told the story of Satu Marade, a bandit of the 1950s. Satu was supposed to have killed his brother's wife and her lover after she had eloped with a Katkari, perceived as inferior to a Koli.[94] This bears out Ghurye, who, in 1957, characterised the Mhadeo Kolis as 'children of agriculture with a more or less war-like tradition ... they are mostly scattered as either a dominant group among others, or as a subservient group where they are recent immigrants.'[95] Already settled landholding peasants at the end of the eighteenth century, endowed with a militant reputation and living in difficult terrain, they do not seem to have suffered significant expropriation during the colonial period.[96] Education was also spreading among them – in 1961 male literacy among the Mahadeo Koli was 18 per cent, and among the Thakur 7.8; and the former had begun to move into the growing urban and industrial economy.[97] A committee headed by Elwin visited their old territory of Jawar in 1960, and described them as 'a fairly well-to-do and respectable group who have good houses, ample land for cultivation and sufficient resistance to stand up to the worst excesses of the money-lenders'.[98]

The subordinate communities of the Sahyadri forests

In the previous section the Thakurs were mentioned as a subordinate community of possibly refugee origin. Kamalu Padir's above-cited statement was part of a succinct assessment of various communities that tells us much about the structure of social relations in the region by the early twentieth century. The rest of it ran as follows:

> The Katkari is very unclean and his body smells. He is a notorious thief. He kills cows and eats beef. He even eats mice and rats ... Most of the 'white-clothed' castes are swindlers. Yet Gujars, Marwadis, Sonars, Muslims, money-lenders and landlords irrespective of caste, are absolute sharks. They use false measures, sell inferior and adulterated stuff and charge exorbitant prices. The Brahmin is

[93] Ghurye, *Mahadev Kolis*, p. 217.
[94] Hardiman, 'Raghu Bhanagre', pp. 123–4.
[95] Ghurye, *The Mahadev Kolis*, p. 215.
[96] Kolis still owned all the land in several villages surveyed by Agarkar and Chapekar in 1955–56. Ghurye, *Mahadev Kolis*, pp. 19–23.
[97] For urban migration and some economic success, see Ghurye, *Mahadev Kolis*, pp. 215–58; another study – this time of Pune observed that '[p]overty which was noticed in the tribal areas was not found among the urban Mahadeo Kolis in Poona city'. Govind Gare, *Tribals in an Urban Setting: A Study of Socio-economic Impact of Poona City on the Mahadeo Kolis* (Poona: Shubdha-Saraswat, 1976), p. 197.
[98] *Report of the Committee on Special Multipurpose Tribal Blocks* (Chairman: Verrier Elwin) (Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, 1960), p. 291.

intelligent. The Mohammedan is a bully who believes in the rod. The Thakur is honest and straight, but unintelligent and timid.[99]

A social history of the Sahyadri is implicit in this description: the Kolis were a dominant peasantry, the Thakurs lesser peasants, and the Katkaris a landless proletariat, living by wage-labour, charcoal manufacture and the sale of forest products. All three were victimised in varying degrees by moneylenders and landlords. However, their previous political and economic status had a significant effect on their destiny in the twentieth century. The Thakurs were settling to agriculture even at the inception of the colonial regime and managed to keep a toehold in the new agrarian order. Around 1880 the *Kolaba Gazetteer* stated that about 5 per cent of the Thakurs owned land and another 10 per cent cultivated as tenants; in 1949 a careful survey in the same district found that 456 Thakurs owned land and 2,213 rented it. Their total population in the district was about 24,000, or probably over 5,000 households; so in the seventy years since the *Gazetteer* was compiled the proportion of landowners had almost doubled to 9 per cent, and of tenants quadrupled to over 40 per cent. Thus the transition from woodland pastoralists to peasant cultivators was far advanced among them.[100]

The Varlis, another Sahyadri community, were less fortunate. They inhabited territories contested between the Portuguese, the Marathas and the rulers of Jawar and Ramnagar, and periodically raided by the Bhils. The Varlis probably lived as cultivators subordinated to whoever dominated this region, and fell easy victims to the landlords and moneylenders who began to establish themselves in the colonial era. The process was described by W. W. Loch in the 1880s:

Ten years ago [the Varlis] had 54,000 acres, now they have 25,000 and at this rate, ten years hence they will have no land left. They are a peculiarly simple, tractable race; hence they fall easy victims to the bullying Parsi and the astute Brahmin or Marwari ... They have practically lost all their land which lies within easy reach of the railway, and it is only in the villages on the extreme east of the district, which are very unhealthy and difficult of access, that they possess much land.[101]

Many Varlis were then reduced to bonded labourers, analogous to the Dublas of southern Gujarat. On the other hand, the Katkaris, already nomadic in the early nineteenth century, were over the next century, reduced to an outcast proletariat, living uneasily between field and

[99] Chapekar, *Thakurs of the Sahyadri*, p. 158.

[100] *Kolaba Gazetteer*, p. 93; K. J. Save, *Report on the Grant of Dalhi and Other Waste Land to Kathkaris and Thakurs in Kolaba District and Their Settlement* (Government of Bombay, 1950), appendix table.

[101] Printed in *Papers Relating to the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act 1879–1894*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Government of India, 1897), II, p. 12.

forest, alternately under the thumb of landlord and contractor, with the lowest literacy rate of any Maharashtrian tribal community.[102] We may thus see how pre-existent social and political conditions have affected the recent trajectory of various communities. A fuller discussion of the trajectories themselves will be found in chapters 8 and 9.

[102] Educational percentages from *Report of the Study Team on Tribal Development Programmes – Maharashtra* (New Delhi: Planning Commission [1967?]), table 3, p. 4 . For a fuller discussion of the fate of the Katkaris, see the third section in ch. 8.

5 The central Indian forest from Mughal suzerainty to British control

PART I – THE BHIL COUNTRY

Introduction

We have so far looked the peoples dwelling in the peninsula; now our focus shifts to its northern boundaries. These are marked by the two great west-flowing rivers, the Narmada and Tapti, and by the parallel ranges that separate their valleys from each other and the Dakhan plateau. In the nineteenth century the forest people who dominated the hill forest in the western half of this region were termed Bhils – a name also found in the rugged country of north-east Gujarat and the adjoining regions of Rajasthan. The ethnonym itself does not (to my knowledge) appear until the early medieval period and is not mentioned in the great classical lexicon *Amarakosha*, nor could I trace it in an exhaustive index to the *Valmiki Ramayana*.[1] However, by 1240 CE when a Sanskrit work on dance was written in north Karnataka, the Bhils evidently possessed a distinct identity and costume, which the performers of a particular dance were supposed to don (*bhillaveshamupeyushim*). The dance was also performed in Maharashtra, but (the treatise continues) it was known there as the Gondli dance since that was the term for Bhilla in Maharashtra at the time.[2] So the name was unfamiliar in thirteenth-century Maharashtra, but the life-style had a local equivalent permitting translation. The name Bhilla (and not necessarily the population) thus originated in the Dravidian-speaking south, and then travelled north to its later lodgement in the central Indian forests. It may therefore well be

[1] A. Loiseleur Deslongchamps (ed.), *Amarakocha ou Vocabulaire D'Amarasimha* (repr. Osnabruck: Biblio Verlag, 1988); Ramkumar Ray *Valmikiramayanakosha* (Varanasi: Chaukhamba, 1965).

[2] *Nrityaratnavali* of Jaya Senapati, cited in S. Srikantha Shastri 'The Gondhali Dance', and dated by him to 1240. *BISMT*, 20, 2 (1939), 81. I am indebted to my colleague P. S. Dwivedi for the translation of the Sanskrit passage cited. On the Southern provenance of the dance see V. V. Deshpande, 'Gondli Nritya', in *BISMT*, 20, 1 (1939), 18–20.

derived from the Telugu/Kannada *villu* (a bow) – that always honourable implement of bloodshed in war and hunting affording a suitable ethnonym for forest communities entering the regional political arena.[3] The name 'Bhillama' borne by no less than five of the early medieval Yadava dynasty of Devagiri may then reflect not their conquest of the Bhils as Sankalia has suggested, but rather their proficiency as archers.[4] Perhaps Bhils became Bhils after kings had been Bhillamas.

By the fifteenth century the name began to be widely known to the peoples living on the periphery of the Vindhyan forests; it appears in a Gujarati text cited below, and is also mentioned in the *Ain-i-Akbari*. Similarly, the *Kalpadrumakosha* (1660 CE) identifies them together with the Parshava and Nishada as 'sheltered by mountains'.[5] Bhimsen, writing at the turn of the seventeenth century grouped Bhils and Kolis together and located them in the mountains:

> [the] mountain starts near Gulshanabad [Nasik] from the boundaries of Konkan and extends towards the region of Gondwana and even further than that, touching the sea in certain places. It is inhabited by Bhils and Kolis. The petty officers could not control them.[6]

When an early nineteenth-century Pandit prepared a Marathi version of various stories from the Puranas, he listed the savage warriors who came and stole the wish-fulfilling cow of the sage Jamadagni; they were 'Mllecha *jat* and Barbar and Yuni and Dravid plunderers and Khurasan and Bhil *jat* and Mahare . . .'[7] Nor was this a novel association: a late fifteenth-century poet of Gujarat lamented the evil times in which Bhills and *mlecchas* were kings (*bhilla mleccha rajan*).[8] The Bhil was thus definitively located among the antagonists of Brahmanical civilisation.

The Bhils at the entry of Maratha power

This did not detract from their military value and regional importance. We have already seen how the Raja of Ramnagar was recruiting Bhils in his struggle against Shivaji, and the Mughal governor of the north Konkan also recruited them for use in sieges.[9] In 1708 Lodhikhan

[3] I owe this etymology to V. Rajagopal.
[4] H. D. Sankalia cited in S. Mulay, *Studies in the Historical and Cultural Geography and Ethnography of the Deccan* (Pune: Deccan College, 1972), p. 242.
[5] Keshava, *Kalpadrumakosha* (Baroda: Gaekwad's Oriental Series No.72, 1928), I, p. 206.
[6] Khobrekar (ed.), *Tarikh*, p. 34.
[7] OIOC Mss Mar B15 fol.87b; *mleccha* were generically exterior barbarians; Yuni were the Greeks, or perhaps Muslims; Dravid inhabitants of South India – perhaps Dravid plunderers were Bedar or Ramoshi; Mahars untouchable village servants.
[8] Cited in M. R. Majumdar, *Cultural History of Gujarat* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965), p. 187.
[9] Pagdi, *Studies in Maratha History*, p. 30.

Pathan employed them to block the pass of Brahmanwadi in Ahmadnagar district.[10] With the evident decay of Mughal power in the peninsula, some Bhil chiefs seem to have retreated into the hill forests and attempted to exercise suzerainty by plunder. This would be a necessary prelude to asserting various claims before whatever authority might succeed in controlling the plains and would therefore need to purchase Bhil forbearance from raiding. It should be emphasised that the Bhils, like the Kolis, were not isolated remnant populations savagely defending themselves against inexorably encroaching civilisation – rather they were determined to share in the goods that civilisation could yield, and to secure this they were prepared to use their mutual solidarity, their knowledge of the hills and forests, of the paths and water-sources, their capacity for guerilla war, as assets to be traded in the regional political arena. They could be allies of the Mughals, of Holkar, and offer refuge to the last Peshwa himself.[11]

In 1738 the Nizam of Hyderabad was decisively worsted by the Marathas at Bhopal, and much of the western Dakhan passed under Maratha control. Not surprisingly therefore, some unidentified Khandesh Bhils presented themselves before the Peshwa in 1740, and stated that they had hereditary claims to specified amounts of cash, grain, sugar, cloth etc. from the villages, which dues were, however, not being paid at present; so they petitioned for their restoration. Letters were duly issued to the local officials of eight Khandesh sub-divisions to pay these dues in conformity with past practice.[12] The adjudication of such claims was part of the process of settling the country and ensuring the smooth collection of taxes.

Success or failure in this enterprise may well have turned on geographical and environmental conditions. The fertile lands of the Tapti valley contained dense populations of long-suffering peasant cultivators, who could bear the burden of paying both Bhil *rakhwaldars* and Maratha commanders. The mountain chiefs could not be bought off as cheaply as the plains Bhils, and evidently continued to enforce larger claims to a shared sovereignty through periodic raids and the levy of blackmail. Sometimes the Maratha regime compounded this for a share of the plunder. In 1755 the Peshwa faced a serious financial crisis, and raised an extraordinary levy (*karjpatti*) to pay off his debts. The order in this connection stated: 'The Vindhyadri mountains contain Rajas and

[10] Contemporary letter, *BISMT*, 7, 1–4 (1926), 86.
[11] In his last flight from the British, Bajirao II was in the company of Kanhya Bhil in the vicinity of Dhulkot before he ultimately surrendered to John Malcolm. *SPD*, 41, pp. 192, 208.
[12] *SPD*, 22, p. 85.

predatory chiefs who trouble the realm in many ways and do not obey the government; so the *karjpatti* has been fixed for them and Malhar Ram Pethe charged to collect it.' The list was headed by Pratapsingh, Raja of Rajpimple, assessed at Rs.100,000, and included Dalelsingh, Rana of Akhrani, at Rs.5,000; Bhil chiefs were listed as Dongrya Vasava and Babjya Vasava of Sagvade (assessed for Rs.10,000), Mot Pahadvi at 2,000, Kalu Pahadvi at the same amount, and so on.[13] At this time, therefore, the aim seems merely to expropriate the expropriators. However, as the Marathas ceased to simply levy tribute, but attempted a settled administration, they had to face the problem of re-establishing agriculture in the Tapti valley.

In regions subject to recurrent raids, the local gentry had often reached an accommodation with the hill peoples, and did not scruple to use them to thwart the centralising aims of the parvenu regime. So, for example, in 1754–55, the hereditary officials of eight sub-divisions of Khandesh were addressed as follows:

> You and the Kolis, in complicity with the Bhils, have made dens in the hills and by burning the property etc. of the villages are causing loss to the government. Therefore your inheritances [*watan*] as well as those of the Kolis are forfeited to the state, and Rajshri Madhavrao Vishvanath is to manage them.[14]

The same document ordered separate letters to be sent to the (presumably compliant) hereditary officers of two other sub-divisions, directing them to stop the customary payments (*chauth lawajima*) made to the Bhils from their treasuries, and to deposit the sums with the aforesaid Madhavrao.

We may presume, however, that settlements were gradually effected, and the more troublesome Bhils were granted claims on the villages in cash and kind, while the chiefs were allowed to levy various tolls on traffic through the different passes they controlled. They might have to periodically renegotiate their claims; an incomplete document of about 1770, addressed to the Peshwa Madhavrao illustrates the process of negotiation at work. Its writer, Jagannath Narayan, was based at the great fortress of Aser, on the eastern boundary of Khandesh, and reported that on an earlier occasion the property of Bhivjya or Bhivanand Bhil (which included fourteen horses) had been seized by the state. The latter was now plundering the region. He had attacked a hamlet near Burhanpur, wounded a few weavers, and looted two or three houses. It was difficult to have guards everywhere, and the multiplication of outposts would be a great expense and loss to the state:

[13] *SSRPD*, 3, 1, pp. 153–4.
[14] *SSRPD*, 3, 1, pp. 162–3.

So two prudent men were sent to negotiate with him and he was told 'The Peshwa had reduced the great ones of the Konkan to obedience, and what are you by comparison? Consider this well. So give assurance that you will observe the law everywhere, otherwise your horses and property are irretrievably lost.' He responded that if assured that full punishment would not be inflicted, he would come to meet me [i.e. submit]. I promised him great honour if he did . . . [At the meeting] he was given a gold ornament of twenty *tolas* weight, and clothes for himself and his following and including miscellaneous expenses, in total six hundred rupees had to be spent. But in return he would not raise the issue of the horses, would not rob within the province of Asher, and would compensate anyone robbed within its bounds. He had held four leading men (*sardars*) hostage in the hills, but brought them to the meeting . . .[document ends][15]

Other Bhils found employment as crop-watchers, wood-cutters and hunters, especially in the new villages within or beside the forest, where the fields would be subject to the almost incessant inroads of wild animals. In times of disorder they might also be needed as guards. In return, they would share in the harvests of the village. A report to the Peshwa in 1813 describes how five or ten Bhils were to be found in many villages of Khandesh – a local officer tried to extort money from some of them, whereupon they rebelled and took shelter in the hills. Sadashiv Abhyankar suggested that the villagers be instructed not to have mountain (*mavli*) Bhils in their villages.[16] Apart from official extortions, seasons of scarcity would also strain the relationship. 1792 saw extensive crop failures all over western India; soon after this, the Pune court began to receive news of widespread risings of Bhils and Kolis. The governor of Khandesh reported that he had enlisted soldiers and attacked the Bhil encampments in the hills, whereupon they had come and offered to submit. It is evident from the report that one of the difficulties in controlling the Bhils was the problem of distinguishing insurgent and settled Bhils, for one of the government demands was that the latter should wear sealed lac tokens as identification. The Bhils offered to return to the villages and live as watchmen (*jagal karavi*), and the court ordered that the villagers should be strictly enjoined to pay them their dues in accordance with past usage.[17]

Unstable regimes of accommodation and conflict

Such arrangements never precluded further conflict; brought on, perhaps by excessive demands on the part of the villagers or the revenue

[15] PA, Sanika Rumal 23, Pudke 6, doc. 13718.
[16] PA, Sanika Rumal 35 Pudke 1 doc. 18799, 1814–15 CE.
[17] *SSRPD*, 6, 2, pp. 171–3.

authorities, or by depredation or violence on the part of the Bhils. Minor conflicts could swiftly escalate into larger confrontations, as a letter written by the hereditary officials of the sub-division of Asher in 1791 illustrates. It begins by reporting various robberies, (one accompanied by two murders) having taken place, followed by the sacking of the house of a government official attached to the state cavalry. The thieves were traced to the village of Korad, in the assigned land (*jagir*) of the Ray Rayan (a noble). The headman, and Javji Naik the village watchman, as well as two brothers of the latter were then arrested. The Ray Rayan's administrator secured the release of the headman while the Bhils were left in detention. Meanwhile, no less a personage than Jadhavrao Vagholkar, the Maratha noble to whom the sub-divisions' revenues were assigned (*mokassadar*), demanded the watchmen's release – but in the interim the commandant of Asher fort had already killed Javji, and continued to detain his brothers. Thereupon their kin gathered, raided the village of Jetune and carried off the cattle and some inhabitants to an encampment in the hills, and beat them. When messengers were sent asking for their release, they responded by demanding the release of the Bhils. There were also many night-time depredations on the standing crops. To confront them would involve much expense, and the local gentry and officials were not united – so finally, in order to secure the return of the men and cattle, the Bhils were released.[18] This episode illustrates how the solidarity of the Bhils, and their ability to react violently from the shelter of the hills provided protection to even humble watchmen of their fraternity, and gave them leverage with eminent personages as jagirdars and mokassadars, who would otherwise have had no regard for such lowly folk.

Apart from taking such independent action in their own defence, the Bhils were also readily available for enlistment by major and minor enemies of the state, as indicated for example by an order from the Peshwa's government in 1764–5 to Vyankat Ramshastri, in charge of the sub-divisions of Kasrabad, Dhadgaon and Mandleshwar in the Satpuda region. The official had reported that the Bhils, the wandering ascetic mercenaries (*gosavi*) and Bajaji Matkar kept his charge in turmoil, preventing cultivation and tax-collection. He was instructed to lay out up to Rs.25,000 on hiring soldiers for a year in order to punish the insurgents properly.[19]

But Bhil chiefs could also figure as employers of mercenary soldiers who would provide a stiffening of musketeers and cavalry to strengthen Bhil bowmen on forays into open country or in operations around forts.

[18] PA, Sanika Rumal no.23 Pudke 5 doc. 13666.
[19] *SSRPD*, 9, 1, p. 298.

Their presence would also enlarge the powers of their chief in his attempts to become a little king of putative Rajput descent. That may well have been the ultimate ambition of Ditya Bhil, who lurked in the hills near the frontier fort of Kukarmunda in 1769–70, and had burned five villages in the vicinity, causing the inhabitants to abandon them, and was also raiding the sub-divisions of Navapur and Bhamer. He had hired both infantry and horsemen from the plains, and had accomplices in the town of Taloda, who sheltered him and supplied him with ammunition, cloth and money. The Peshwa's officers were directed to seize the families and property of those who had gone to serve him, and supplied with lists of these offenders. They came from a number of villages – for example, from Torkheda and Ranala which were the hereditary estate of the aristocratic Kadam family, from where one Satvaji Kadam (a relative?) had joined the Bhils together with twenty-five horsemen.[20] Ditya Bhil was still active two decades later, when he overran the territory of the petty state (*samsthan*) of Bodhawal in Khandesh, and drove out its Rana. The latters' sons Chandrasingh and Bhagvantsingh then petitioned for its restoration, promising to assist the government with a body of soldiers when required, and it was restored to them by the Peshwa's government in 1793–4.[21] Shortly after this, if a later tradition is to be believed, Ditya Bhil was captured and killed by the Rana of Akhrani.[22]

However, the use of cavalry and infantry meant a loss of mobility that could be costly in the event of defeat, as Chiman Deshmukh of Surgana discovered to his cost in October 1769, when he attacked the Peshwa's territory with a retinue made up of musketeers, Bhils and fifty or seventy-five horsemen. He was overtaken by cavalry and his heavy infantry (*gardi*) broken – 200 or more being killed and an equal number wounded, but the Bhils apparently fled without much loss, because their casualties are not mentioned in the despatch. The ground was rocky and covered with tall grass, and the enemy horse could not easily escape – fifty or sixty horses were captured as well.[23]

Local gentry generally had to reach some accommodation with the Bhils. We may see this operating in the case of the Kadam Bande family, for example. By their own account, the aristocratic Kadam family came to Khandesh as raiders in the early eighteenth century, and devastated the land. The Nizam of Hyderabad bought them off by granting them the whole of Sultanpur and half of Nandurbar subdivisions. The

[20] *SSRPD*, 9, 1, pp. 302–3.
[21] *SSRPD*, 6, 2, pp. 114–15.
[22] B. V. Bhat (ed.), *Marathyanchya Itihasanchi Sadhane*, no.23 (Dhule: Rajvade Itihasa Samshodhana Mandala, 1947), p. 48. The text has 'Dilya', which I amend to Ditya.
[23] *SPD*, 39, pp. 118–19.

Kadams occupied the local Rajput stronghold of Ranala, rebuilt the fort, and established two weekly markets. Meanwhile, the Rawals of Torkheda, north of the Tapti river, were ravaging the country, carrying off inhabitants and sacrificing them before the god Hanuman. The whole country was desolate and overgrown with thorny vegetation. Raghujirao Kadam was then commissioned by the Nizam to put down the Rawals and promised Torkheda as a hereditary fief. Needless to say, the Kadams carried all before them, subdued the Rawals and Bhils and occupied Torkheda. When the Peshwa's power began to make itself felt in Khandesh, Madhavrao Kadam prudently secured his confirmation of their tenure of Ranala.[24] The Kadams were generally out of favour in Pune, and evidently decided to develop a local base by cultivating the more formidable of the Bhil chiefs. We have seen how they assisted Ditya Bhil; again in 1775–6 the Kadam Bandes and their Bhil allies seized an important personage, Shankraji Khanderao 'by treachery'. A local officer was exhorted to punish them and bring them under control, but to do so in a way that would result in the release of Shankraji – evidently a tacit hint at compromise.[25] By the early nineteenth century the Kadam Bandes had lost their major assignments in the Peshwa's lands, and retained only their hereditary villages at least one of which, had a thousand houses but was (then) wholly depopulated. In 1813–14 they stood security for Jiva Vasava, a prominent Bhil chief, who subsequently broke out and plundered two villages. The Peshwa's officer had no doubt that the Bandes were in league with the Bhils at the time.[26] It is not accidental that the Bande family had close relations with the Gaikwads of Baroda – the often insubordinate Maratha government adjoining Khandesh – the process at work was evidently that which Wink has dubbed '*fitna*'. On the other hand, given the disfavour with which they were viewed by central authority, it was perhaps only this alliance, and the ability mobilise the Bhils, that enabled them to retain their estates in the province.

Men more powerful than the Kadams needed to conciliate Bhil chiefs. Tukoji Holkar marched through Khandesh on his way to the battle of Kharda (1795), and paused to arrange an agreement with Jhujharya, a Bhil chief who was plundering in western Khandesh. After Tukoji's death in 1797, his son Jaswantrao sought the support of Jhujharya in his

[24] The narrative was prepared for the British. Bhat (ed.), *Marathyanchya Itihasanchi Sadhanen*, no.23 pp. 4–5; *Itihasa Sangraha*, 6, 4–6 (1914–15), 36.

[25] PA, Sanika Rumal 19, Pudke 8, doc. 11117.

[26] PA, Sanika Rumal 26, Pudke 5, doc. 14136; the Bandes seem to have successfully convinced the British authorities that they were unwarrantedly persecuted by the Peshwa – see the highly sympathetic notice of them in Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, I, p. 145n.

contest with Daulatrao Sindhia and Kashirao Holkar. Jhujharya then used his links with the garrison of Sultanpur fort to ensure the capture of the town by Jaswantrao. In 1802, on his way back north after his victory over the Peshwa, Jaswantrao met Jhujhar Naik and his son Devji, and presented the latter with a gold bracelet, a horse, ceremonial clothes worth Rs.1,000, the village of Chikhli, and a cash stipend.[27] Devji remained a powerful and important figure, and the British government was to allow him to retain his village as well as pay him a pension.[28] His activities in the last years of the Maratha regime will be discussed in a later section in this chapter.

War and politics in time of crisis: the 1803 famine and after

Periodic conflict and negotiation with the ruling power and its local representatives was evidently woven into the fabric of Bhil life in Khandesh, but an especially acute phase commenced at the turn of the eighteenth century, twenty years before the British conquest. As a British officer, writing in 1843 largely on the basis of oral traditions, described it,

> the scourge of war was in 1803 succeeded by a most unusual and withering famine, which extended from the Satpoora Hills to the city of Hyderabad. Under this calamity, the country became for a while deserted: many cultivators fled to Berar and Guzerat; the greater portion of the Bheel population abandoned the plains, and returned not again; and now commenced the Bund-Umul, the period of utter anarchy and confusion, which so long reigned throughout this unhappy land. Organised gangs started up in every direction, and the mountain ridges were quickly studded with Huttees, [camps] from the tiny hamlet of the freebooter to the grand encampments of powerful Naiks, who, assuming the state of petty princes, despatched their armies of a thousand men to sack and lay waste the surrounding country . . .
>
> Totally unable, however, by open force, to restrain the violence of the marauders, fraud of the basest nature was on every occasion resorted to; cajoled and inveigled by hollow promises of pardon and preferment, they often agreed to the proposed terms, and, flocking to some appointed place, on the strength of the pledged faith of the Government, were massacred without remorse.[29]

It is almost certain that the goriest stories were uncritically adopted by British writers anxious to stress both the efficiency and the humanity of

[27] Bhat (ed.), *Marathyanchya Itihasanchi Sadhanen*, pp. 47–9.
[28] *SRBG* 26, pp. 229–30.
[29] *SRBG*, 26. Graham 'Historical Sketch of the Bheel Tribes Inhabiting the Province of Khandesh', pp. 208–9; similar accounts also appeared in the District Gazetteers compiled towards the end of the nineteenth century, which report the massacre of thousands, men, women and children.

their own regime by contrast to the one it had supplanted. The Maratha documents of the period display a more complex and variable set of strategies than Graham credited that government with, including many that were also applied by his own administration. In 1798 a virtual civil war broke out in Maharashtra, and it seems that the Bhils also seized the opportunity to raid far and wide. The Peshwa realised that sub-divisional officers could not cope with this on a local basis, and appointed a special officer to control the mountains from Kasarbari to Ajanta, who was to maintain a contingent of horse and foot and be paid by a levy of five percent on the revenues of the sub-divisions, to be paid for five years while the 'settlement' with the Bhils was to be made.[30] The officer entrusted with this task is not identifiable, but may have been one Dinkarpant, who, according to a narrative prepared in 1820 by Govindrao, deshmukh of Lohara sub-division, was sent out in 1797 to punish the Bhils and troubled the region by levying heavy tributes. If so, he cannot have had much success in his official function, because the narrative recorded that he fell foul of a soldier of fortune, Birbal Hazari, and was defeated.[31]

Khandesh, however, fell on the main route of armies going either north or south, and was subjected to severe depredations in this and succeeding years, and then badly hit by the famine of 1803 – a famine aggravated by the war then being waged between the British and the Maratha princes. The Lohara narrative recollected: 'Year 1213 [1802–3] due to the great famine many people died or were driven to desperation. A few remained in the old settlements.' After this, fresh efforts were made to restore order and resettle the country. An order from the Peshwa in 1802–3 to his governor in Khandesh noted:

> You inform us that in the past the Bhils used to receive grain from the villages for their services as watchmen, which they have not been getting of late. Therefore they have rebelled, are inflicting terrible sufferings on the inhabitants, and have closed the passes. Therefore three hundred regular infantrymen are being sent to punish the Bhils. Deploy them wherever they have blocked the passes, and free the roads of them. The Bhils formerly received grain from the villages which they no longer receive: if they cease to trouble the realm, if they do not give any trouble whatever, and return to guarding it, then let them be given what they formerly received, after determining what that was. Separate letters have been sent to the local officers. Then issue grain after making good and dependable arrangements, taking securities from the Bhils to prevent them from further troubling the land.[32]

In subsequent years, we find safe-conducts issued to particular Bhils, assuring them of a restoration of their dues provided they returned to

[30] *SSRPD*, 5, pp. 170–1.
[31] OIOC Mss. Mar G17 fos.1–2.
[32] *SSRPD*, 5, p. 171.

their duties as watchmen, so it is evident that the policy was persisted with.[33] It was not however successful in resettling the province, which was beset by so many other marauders that the impoverished and depopulated country could not maintain Bhils on the previous scale. Desultory warfare, accompanied by attempts at settlement continued well into the British period, and only petered out in the 1830s.

Contrary to the lurid picture presented by D. C. Graham, much of this warfare was characterised by minor raids and small skirmishes, not involving the massacre of thousands on either side. Messengers and emissaries moved regularly between the opposing camps, and intrigues and negotiations figure as prominently in the records as marches and combats. For example, a report from 1813–14:

> The traders of Pimpalner were robbed by Bhils within sight of the fort; so Ramrao Gadgil set off in pursuit and encountered them. There was a fight: two Bhils were killed and five wounded. The rest fled into the forest; after this Gadgil burned their encampment and halted at Mulher, from where he wrote to me asking for reinforcements. Then Govind Sivaji and Raoji Damodar of Dinkarpant Sathe's service were despatched with a force. After they joined Gadgil, the Bhils sent a feeler through the zamindars of the locality; they were encouraged, and twenty Bhil chiefs came in, and the headmen of five villages agreed to stand security for their good conduct and they undertook to serve the government, not to trouble our districts, and to safeguard the country between Chandwad and Shelebari, and to recompense anyone robbed in that range.[34]

Another letter describes the frustrations and difficulties of an officer attempting to suppress the Bhils:

> The Bhils have a large following: two or four hundred Arab and Sindi infantrymen plus horsemen. They come forward to fight but then withdraw into the forest. They plunder some village in the night, and escape by a side-road by the time the news reaches us, so that we do not even know where they are. If we follow one party then other parties form in the vicinity and attack our rear. Our force is small – if it goes in one direction, other areas are left uncovered. I have written repeatedly about the need to enlist more men, but have not received the order to do so. There are major rebellions here which must be suppressed. Holkar's officer at the towns of Siyur and Dhopalgaon and the Moghal [Nizam's] revenue officer honoured the Bhil women with gifts of saris and blouses and feasted them – such is the treason here ! The Bhils who live at Jategaon and Vankle in Vinchurkar's charge and throng the bazaars there come and raid this province. Vinchurkar is responsible for security on that bank of the Ganga [Godavari], but his horsemen have never come forward to obstruct the robbers. Bhils gather on that side and come and plunder villages and fight me here. There have recently been two combats – horses and horsemen were

[33] *SSRPD*, 5, pp. 172–3.
[34] PA, Sanika Rumal 26, Pudke 5 doc. 14174.

wounded; nobody from Vinchurkar's side has assisted me to this day. I cannot understand what he can be doing irresponsibly in Khandesh.[35]

In this environment finesse as well as force had to be deployed for success. Ramrao Vireshwar Gadgil, newly posted in Khandesh wrote: 'according to orders, I have attempted negotiation but the force with me is small, and all the local officers are in complicity with the rebels . . .'[36] But there were successes too: thus Tegkhan, a noted freebooter in league with the Bhils, had camped about ten miles from the Peshwa's officer Govind Shivdev. The latter began negotiations with four foreign officers in the Khan's service, promising them rewards if they could persuade the Khan to submit. They agreed, and the Khan visited his camp and was honoured with a turban, and signed an agreement to enter the Peshwa's service. It was hoped that his men and the government forces combined could then attack the Bhils who were located some distance beyond his old camp.[37] I cannot say if the scheme was successful, or whether the Bhils once again successfully escaped into the forest after another inconclusive skirmish.

Naroba Takti, an employee of Tryambakji Dengle, appears in the *Bombay Gazetteer* as a man 'who butchered the Bhils wherever found . . . during fifteen months it is said that 15,000 human beings were massacred'.[38] The contemporary record presents a less sanguinary picture. The writer is probably Naroba's employer Tryambakji Dengle.

There are ten or twelve Bhil encampments permanently present in the Gujardari and Kaldari from where they tormented the government villages and carried off all the cattle. The thanedar pursued them, but the Bhils escaped with the animals to their camps. Thereupon the villagers from this province and Daive province came and narrated their woes. Upon this, respectable persons were sent to the Bhils to tell them that it would be well if they ceased oppressing the peasants and were loyal to the state. The Bhils then retorted 'We are kings of the forest, our ways are different, do you not worry your head with them.' They made many such wild speeches and no arrangement with them seemed possible, and the peasants were suffering. If their complaints went to the Court the Maharaj would be angry with me that complaints came from the peasants of the province when I was posted there.

Knowing this, I reported the talks with the Bhils in detail and proceeded against them. A battle ensued and one to two hundred Bhils were killed, and one or two hundred leapt over cliffs to their deaths. Five or seven chiefs were killed as well, and their main leader, Khandya was wounded twice by my

[35] PA, Sanika Rumal 29, Pudke 6, doc. 16449.
[36] PA, Parasnis Transcripts, vol.12, pp. 285–6.
[37] PA, Sanika Rumal 26, Pudke 5 doc. 14136.
[38] *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency: History of the Konkan, Deccan and Southern Maratha Country* (Bombay: Government Press, 1896), p. 630.

follower Naraba Takte and captured; and four or five hundred cattle and one or two hundred goats, and thirty-four horses, large and small, were brought back.[39]

This was the most sanguinary encounter that I have found in the records, and may have been the source of the legend that hundreds of Bhils were annually hurled over the scarp of the fort of Antur to their deaths.[40]

In reality, the situation does not seem to have had the race war character that British sources (which become more lurid they grow more remote from the events) tend to give it. When the Peshwa's officer Sadashiv Baji Abhyankar settled down in the summer of 1813 to prepare a situation report for his master, he highlighted not military victories, but the fact that five rebel chiefs had submitted to the government. He then went on to discuss the sequence of events by which this had been brought about in each case – mainly by the successful exploitation of internal conflicts. Take, for example the case of Kuvar Vasava, a Bhil chief:

Kuvar Vasava's father, Umed Vasava had been killed by Jiva Vasava, who also appropriated the victim's hereditary tributes [*giras*] and villages in Baglan, which he still held. Therefore Kuvar aforesaid joined the government forces and said 'I will show that I can serve the state by punishing Jiva; after that let my patrimonial dues and fees be restored to me'. Upon which this servant [the writer] told him 'After you have accomplished the service, then if you have ancient patrimonial claims to tribute and other dues, a petition will be sent to the Lord, and they will be continued in accordance with the order then received.' Kuvar has gathered a following of a thousand men and advanced on Jiva.

Similarly, Narsingh, ruler of Rajpimpla, who had been driven from his territory by Jiva Vasava in alliance with Mairal Narayan, a servant of the Gaikwad raja of Baroda, was mobilised. He offered, if his following was reinforced with government troops, to either kill or capture Jiva Vasava. Since this might involve hostilities with Baroda, further orders were requested.[41] Jiva was well aware of this difficulty, and remained a thorn in the Peshwa's flesh for several years, consistently (according to the available news-reports) taking shelter in the Baroda territory when

[39] *SPD*, 41, p. 40.

[40] Graham, 'Historical Sketch', p. 209 in *SRBG*, 26. Of course, it is possible either that no record was kept, which I judge unlikely, or that I have failed to locate the relevant document, which is always possible.

[41] PA, Sanika Rumal 26, Pudke 4, doc. 14165. At Baroda, the matter appeared in quite a different light, and we find Abhyankar being excoriated as a faithless and short-sighted individual who was harbouring marauders who had fled Gaikwad territory. *Historical Selections from the Baroda State Records*, 5 vols. (Baroda Record Office, 1934–39), V, p. 701.

pressed. Newsletters also allege that the Bande family (who had ties to Baroda) were in league with him.[42] The last Peshwa, Bajirao II was none the less hopeful of recruiting Bhils from that area to fight as guerillas against the British, and despatched Sakharam Laghate and Kadar Bhaldar to raise Bhils to ravage the Surat district and interrupt British communications.[43]

The British regime which displaced Bajirao allied itself with his Bhil enemies and antagonised his Bhil friends. Kuvar thus became an enemy, and pursuing his feud, may ultimately have slain Jiva: in 1822 we find Kuvar apprehensive of a joint attack from G. A. Rigby and Chumar Vasava, son of Jiva.[44] That experienced intriguer, Kadar Bhaldar, changed sides early; in 1817 we find him assisting the British General Smith in western Khandesh.[45] It would appear, then, that the British regime did not initially follow a policy any different from that of its Maratha predecessor.

Conclusion

If we review the foregoing narratives and citations, it becomes evident that the Bhil-dominated lands were no tranquil backwaters, isolated from the turbulent politics of the peninsula. Nor indeed were they inhabited by relic populations obstinately preserving their archaic life-ways. They were in fact deeply integrated into the political economy of medieval India. Their lands supplied wood, grazing and other products and they thronged the bazaars to dispose of both their produce and their plunder. They were often employed by the military entrepreneurs of the day, and but also set up on their own account, employing both scribes and soldiers in that enterprise. Not just warriors, they were also diplomats capable of exploiting differences between regimes and rifts among officials. Finally we should note that they understood and participated in the honorific economy of the times – so (as we have seen) the Nizam's officers gave Bhil women saris and blouses and Jaswantrao Holkar gifted Jhujhar Naik a gold bracelet, a horse, robes of honour and a village.

[42] PA, Sanika Rumal 26, pudke 4, doc. 14164, among others.
[43] MIS, 25 – Bapu Gokhale Patravyavahara, p. 63.
[44] This may be inferred from the letter of J. P. Willoughby 9 January 1822, in *SRBG*, 23 pp. 704–5.
[45] OIOC Mss Mar G17 fo.12.

PART II – THE GOND COUNTRY

Introduction: the rise of the Gond kingdoms

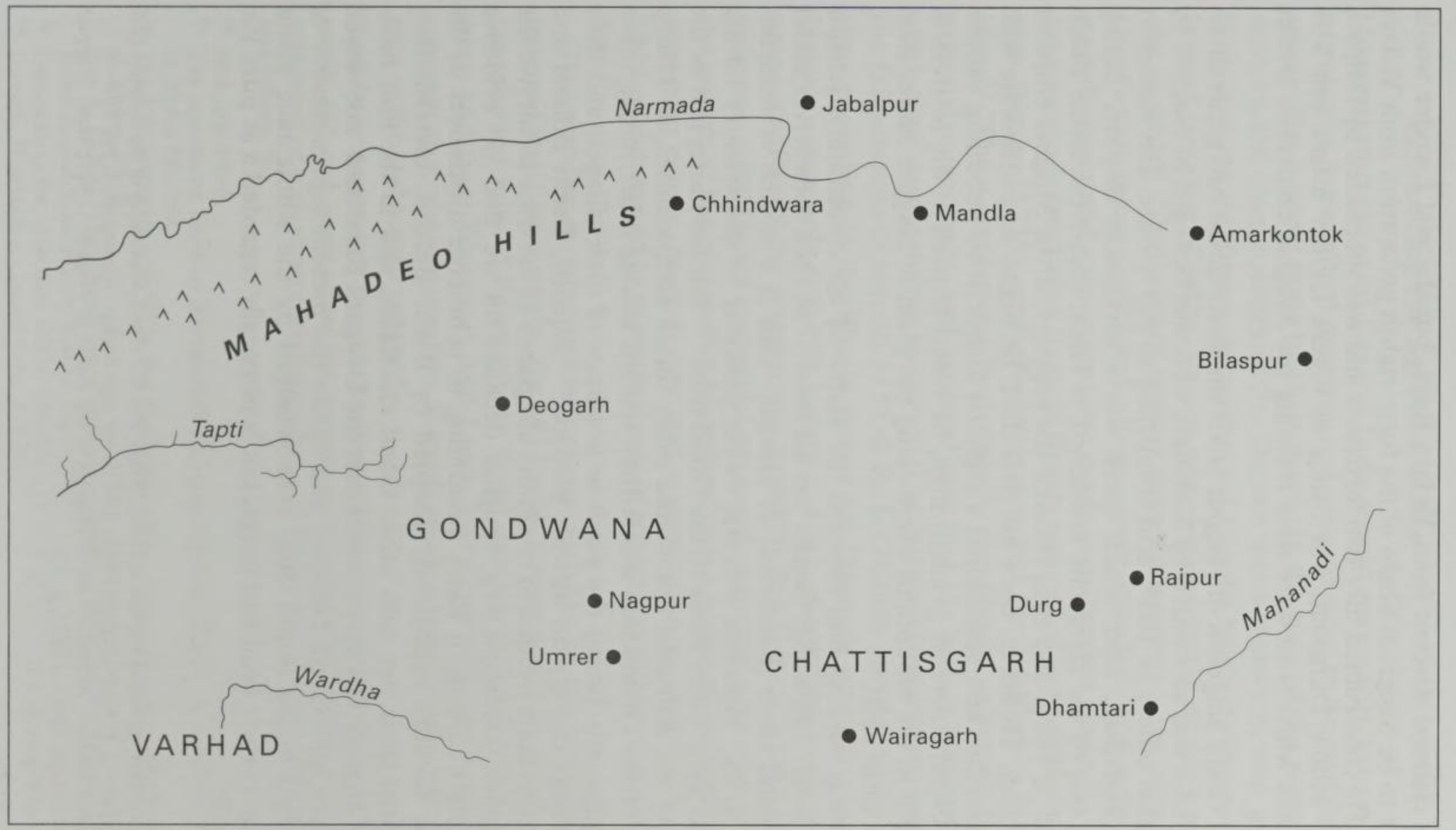
The territory where forest warriors were called Bhilla was bounded to the east by the domain where they were termed Gond. Like Bhilla, the name Gond has southern origin, probably being derived from 'konda' meaning hill or mountain. It is an exonym – till the late nineteenth century a recognised synonym in Gondi was 'Koitor'.[46] 'Gond' would then be the equivalent of northern ethnonyms like 'Dogra', also meaning 'hillman'. When Malcolm wrote in 1824, the Gond territory extended as far west as Mandaleshwar on the Narmada river, and eastward into Western Orissa and Chotanagpur. To the north their territory was bounded by the Bundela chiefdoms, and to the south by the open plains of Chhattisgarh and Varhad. Much of this region has seen cycles of agrarian expansion and contraction, and as late as the mid nineteenth century the remains of large towns and forts were found amidst thinly populated jungle. As early as the third century BCE the Maurya emperor Ashoka felt that there would be a literate public for a rock edict inscribed at Rupnath, 70 kms. from modern Jabalpur.[47] By the end of the first millennium CE several kingdoms had taken shape on both sides of the Vindhya range, and the region was prosperous enough to attract literati such as Halayuddha from Dakshin Rarhi (Bengal), who composed the Sanskrit eulogy to the Narmada inscribed in the Amareshvara temple at Mandhata in 1063 CE.[48] The prosperity of the plains may have attracted raiders from the hill forest, some of whom had to be enlisted to ward off the others; at any rate we find Gond chiefs entering the service of various rulers by the end of the fifteenth century. So, for example, one Jatba first appears in the documents as a commander in the service of Tulobaji, ruler of Nagpur; but by the time Abul Fazl compiled the *Ain* (*c.* 1595) he had become an independent ruler, maintaining all the state of a regional court.[49] Similar processes were at work on the northern edge of the Vindhya, where a prosperous kingdom existed with its capital at Gadha in the sixteenth century. Here the

[46] S. Hislop, *Papers relating to the Aboriginal Tribes of the Central Provinces – edited with notes and Preface by Richard Temple* (No place: the editor, 1866), p. 5, and Gondi song verse 33.

[47] Hira Lal, *Descriptive Lists of the Inscriptions in the C. P. and Berar* (Nagpur: Government Press, 1916), p. 20.

[48] Ibid., p. 72.

[49] Maharashtra State Gazetteers: *Chandrapur District* (Bombay: Maharashtra Government Press, 1973), pp. 60–74; S. G. Chatte, 'New Light on the Gond Kingdom of Deogarh', *Annual Bulletin of the Nagpur University Historical Society*, no. 5 (1950), 78–82.



Map 4 Central India

family claimed descent from Yadava Raya, but the real founder would appear to be Sangram Shahi of the forty-eighth generation from Yadava Raya. He constructed fifty-two fortresses and was succeeded by Dalpati, whose widow Durgavati was ruling as regent for her infant son Vira Narayana when both were slain resisting the Mughal emperor's armies in 1564.

The Gond kingdom of Nagpur faced the same threat two generations later. Jatba was succeeded by Kokshah, who was besieged in Nagpur by a Mughal officer in 1637, and compelled to pay tribute. His successor was Kesarishah, after which there was a succession dispute, during which one of the claimants converted to Islam under the name Bakht Buland in 1686, and thus secured the support of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. However, once his rival died, he began to collaborate with the Marathas and established a regional kingdom by subduing various other Gond rulers. A prudent man, he based himself at the fortress of Deogarh in the mountains overlooking the plain of Nagpur rather than at that town itself.[50]

Political success had elevated the status of his community. Jenkins noted in the 1820s that Gonds 'are allowed . . . to class themselves under the second caste [Kshatriya] of Hindus. This is a stretch of complaisance in the Mahratta officers, owing probably to the country having been so long under Rajas of the Gond tribe.'[51] Furthermore, just as the Kolis of the Sahyadri dominated other forest communities, so Hislop noted of the Gonds that where they resided among other jungle tribes 'they generally [were] the *patels* or headmen of their villages; and their neighbours occupy an inferior position.'[52] Equally, Bakht Buland and his descendants needed to retain the allegiance of the tribe to survive the turbulence accompanying Mughal decline. So we find no evidence therefore of Deogarh Rajas attempting to submerge themselves in the Islamic identity expediently adopted by Bakht Buland. Instead, they cultivated their ties with other Gond chieftains, and in the mid nineteenth century Hislop recorded that the Deogarh Rajas had 'not ceased to marry into Gond families; and hence the present representative of that regal house is not only acknowledged by the whole race about Nagpur as their head and judge, but is physically regarded a as pure Raj Gond'.[53]

[50] An excellent political history is C. U. Wills, *The Raj Gond Maharajas of the Satpura Hills* (Nagpur: C. P. Government Press, 1923), see also Sarkar, *Aurangzib*, I, pp. 208–9.
[51] Richard Jenkins, *Report on the Territories of the Rajah of Nagpur* (1827; repr. Nagpur: Government Press, 1923), p. 15.
[52] Hislop, *Papers*, p. 13.
[53] Ibid., p. 5.

Refounding the agrarian order

However, the plains of Central India would necessarily have a mixed population, especially if peasants and artisans were to be established to sustain the nascent state by their taxes. At the turn of the seventeenth century, the open country of the Deccan was a theatre of war, and it is likely that many refugees were attracted into the relatively tranquil lands beyond the river Wardha. At any rate, Jenkins writes of this period as one in which '[i]ndustrious settlers from all quarters were attracted to Gondwana; many towns and villages were founded; and agriculture, manufactures and even commerce made considerable advances.'[54] The process accelerated after Raghoji Bhosle was called in to settle a succession dispute (1735), and effectively usurped the kingdom a few years later.[55] While supplanting Burhanshah, the Bhosles acknowledged his notional sovereignty, and assigned him and his heirs a fraction of the original revenues of their kingdom. The Nizam's government estimated the full assessment around 1735 at Rs.1,138,000, but the actual collections according to the Bhosle record for Deogarh province (including Nagpur) were only 900,000 rupees *c.* 1745. According to the audited accounts of 1808 the revenue was Rs.2,729,752.[56] Such a large increase indicates a stable and successful economy, a picture also supported by the growth of Nagpur and its hinterland into a major manufacturing and exporting centre. Nagpur city had a population of about 120,000 by 1820, which would have made it one of the largest inland cities in South Asia.[57]

The woodlands retreated before axe and fire as the agrarian order renewed itself once again. By 1813 teak timber came to Nagpur from the wooded hills of Baurgarh, in Betul district, 200 kilometres northwest, and from Wairagarh and Lanji, 150 kilometres eastward.[58] This suggests that the observation Forsyth made in the 1860s was equally true of the eighteenth century:

> Round the settlements the valuable sorts [of trees] have mostly been exterminated; and such parts as are not actually under tillage are covered with a scrub composed of such thorny species as *Acacia Arabica, A. Catechu, Zyziphus Jujuba* and others.[59]

[54] Ibid., pp. 74–5.
[55] The agreement between Burhanshah Mahipati Rai and Raghoji is in OIOC Mss Mar D. 35 fos.74b-76a.
[56] The 1735 estimate is in Wills, *Raj Gond Maharajas*, p. 169; for 1808 OIOC Mss Mar. D. 31 fos. 20–2.
[57] See S. Guha, 'The Handloom Industry of Central India 1825–1950', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 26, 3 (1989).
[58] Distances as the crow flies. OIOC Mss Mar. D. 31 fo.64.
[59] Forsyth, *Highlands of Central India*, p. 216.

Not infrequently, the new settlements of the seventeenth century came up on on old sites. When Jenkins' research assistant interrogated the gentry of the prosperous little commercial centre of Umrer about the beginnings of the place and its first rulers, he was told:

> In the beginning the place was ruled by Dilip Gond Raja – his descendants are still to be found in Durg town. At that time there were fifty or a hundred houses where now there is a town and mart. This area was covered with trees and bushes, and there were the ruined walls of an old mud fort. After that Bakht Bulund Gond Raja made enquiries and established that this was part of his realm, and came here. Yunaji Pant Deshpande, an ancient zamindar [narrator's ancestor] went and met him. At that time the population was still small, and Yunaji informed the Raja of it. The latter approved of Yunaji and appointed him hereditary zamindar and fixed his dues and rights, and asked him to make the territory prosperous and populous. This Yunaji achieved.[60]

The Gond bards shared this understanding of civilisation. In the mid nineteenth century Stephen Hislop collected a version of the legend of Lingo, the Gond hero. Lingo was depicted as cutting away the trees, building a city, establishing a market and introducing settled agriculture and the use of carts and oxen.[61]

A less rosy picture of the activities of Yunaji Pant of Umrer (here more correctly termed Vamanaji) and his successors, but a very similar account of settlement and forest clearance comes from the neighbouring sub-division of Chimur, which was also bestowed on a kinsman of Birshah Gond:

> the were only ten or twenty houses in it; then the fief-holder cut down the trees and gave assurances of low taxation to the peasants and began the process of settlement, which began to progress; but the grazier-folk (*gavli*) of Garad sub-division and Vamanaji Pant of Umrad, these two were both refractory and used to plunder the villages, and so the population could not increase. It remained small.

Raids, reprisals, and the periodic desertion of villages were here, as in Khandesh, woven into the political economy of the region. Even in Umrer sub-division in 1821 out of 268 villages only 120 had resident peasants, and another 100 were cultivated by commuting or shifting cultivators; 30 had been lost for a hundred or more years in 'the great forest' (*mahorani)* and another 18 long abandoned.[62]

Gondwana in the time of troubles and after

The time of troubles at the beginning of the nineteenth century saw the formation of Gond bands in the hills and woodlands, and the campaigns

[60] OIOC Mss Mar. D. 44 fos.1b-2a.
[61] Hislop, *Papers*, p. 118.
[62] OIOC Mss Mar. D. 44 fos.51a-b; and answer no.32.

to check them may well have resembled those mounted in Khandesh. However, the crisis was less intense in the Nagpur kingdom. To begin with, the great famine of 1802–3 was not as severe as in Khandesh and the adjoining areas of Nimar. Only in the latter region therefore do we find agrarian disruption as acute as in the southern Bhil lands discussed earlier. So in the middle Narmada valley (the Nimar region) in 1819–20 over 1,000 villages belonging to Sindhia and Holkar lay abandoned owing to the ravages of the Gonds. A British officer suggested that the only way forward was surrendering some villages to the Gonds 'to effect a partial settlement which may facilitate and encourage the introduction of other inhabitants'. John Malcolm concurred, adding that every village the 'Goand Freebooters ... are tempted to repeople and cultivate, will be the cause of fifty others being restored to prosperity'.[63]

Social disintegration, (as indicated by the records of tax-collection and the maintenance of long-distance trade routes) was less acute in Deogarh and Nagpur. Indeed, the really acute crisis here may have come later and been the result of British attempts to take control of the Maratha kingdoms. Bajirao raised the Bhils to assist his last-ditch resistance to British power, and Appa Sahib at Nagpur employed Gonds to disturb the country in 1818. Arrested by Richard Jenkins, Appa Sahib then escaped into the Mahadeo hills, joined Chitu Pendhari and was sheltered by the Gond chiefs who took the opportunity to raid far and wide.[64] A full-scale campaign was mounted to subdue them, but Appa Sahib was never captured, and finally escaped to the Punjab. However, the period of turmoil was relatively shorter, and did not lead to an extensive collapse of the agrarian order.

A snapshot of the region is provided by the detailed report written by Richard Jenkins, and by the voluminous Marathi notes prepared by his assistant Vinayakrao between 1809 and 1824. Agrarian settlement had created mixed and stratified communities as both occupational specialisation and immigration generated a mosaic of identities. It is likely that, like Rajputs in Rajputana, Gonds had always been a minority of the population in Gondwana. The upper strata had, as we saw, begun to separate into an aristocracy well before the Maratha conquest, and the process appears to have continued under the Bhosles, with certain lineages claiming the status of Rajgond. Basing himself on a census taken in 1825 Jenkins wrote that Gonds made up over a quarter of the population in Chhindwara and other areas in the hills north of Nagpur, but not more than a twelfth in the plains. In the agricultural tracts of

[63] OIOC Board's Colln. vol. F/4/755 pt.II pp. 152–3, 146, 179.

[64] Grant (ed.), *C. P. Gazetteer*, p. 312. We may recollect the slogan of the guerilla resistance to Napoleon in Spain, 'Viva Ferdinando y vamos robando'.

Chanda they were a fourteenth of the population, and in Chhattisgarh about 4 per cent; but here also they were more numerous in the chiefdoms that bordered the plains.[65] If we look at the manuscripts from which such estimates derived, we find evidence of some Gonds having differentiated themselves by occupation like Koikopal and Gowari (herdsmen), or Gond Teli (oilpressers). So, for example, of the 2601 houses enumerated in the rural section of Umrer sub-division in 1822, only 315 were identified as Gond, and 1115 were simply classed as 'Kunbi' (cultivator).[66] Many Gonds were in fact ordinary peasant farmers at the beginning of the nineteenth century, even in the hill-tracts. Bradley described their occupations in the Gawilgarh hills in 1845:

> Pastoral pursuits occupy the attention of many; not a few cultivate the various fertile strips of land occurring along the valleys, reclaimed from the wild jungle or or cleared on the hill-side; whilst a remnant, and not a small one either, are found retaining their old erratic habits, with much of their attending ferocity. These are principally of a tribe called 'Nals' or shepherds . . .[67]

Those who retained the foraging life-style were nonetheless deeply involved in the market economy. Bradley describes how a hill Gond would come to the villages below the hills

> where he barters the produce of the jungul (sic) for cotton cloths &c.: these are logs and poles of blackwood and teak, with various other sorts of timber – firewood, grass, bamboos – teak leaves for thatching, and leaves of the climbing cuchanar for the banian to wrap up the commodities they sell in the bazaar – resinous gums . . . grass oil, wild honey, and bees wax.[68]

The ideal of social hierarchy had also been adopted. Bradley was informed of the existence of a social hierarchy of eight ranks among the Gonds, with 'Bowyah' [Bhumia? a landlord] or Rajgond at the top – 'a class from which more particularly the military are chosen' – while at the bottom were the Bhulli, the 'least worthy class amongst which are found Dhairs [low-caste village servants] and weavers'.[69] Furthermore, the wealthier Gonds also aspired to *kshatriya* status. Hislop observed in the mid nineteenth century that they wore the sacred thread, and made 'great efforts to have their claim allowed, by contracting marriage with needy Rajput brides.' However, it is possible that the experience of Brahmanical Hinduism under Maratha rule generated some antipathy

[65] Jenkins, *Report*, p. 12.
[66] OIOC Mss Mar. D. 44 – table fos.26b-27a.
[67] W. H. Bradley, 'Desultory Observations on the Probable Origin of the Ghonds' *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society*, 7 (1844–46), 210.
[68] Ibid., 182.
[69] W. H. Bradley, 'The Topography and Climate of Chikuldah' *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society*, 7 (1844–46), 179–80.

among the common Gonds, for Hislop adds that the majority resented any imputation of belonging 'to any portion of the Hindu community'.[70] Wills has plausibly argued that the Raj Gonds' advance to Rajput status remained incomplete because of their weak political position and late arrival in power.[71] However, we also need to consider the effects of the decline of the Mughals and the consequent dominance of the Marathas over both Rajputs and Raj Gonds. This probably dimmed the attraction of the Rajput ideal in Central India (though it revived later under the impact of colonial pedagogy). Furthermore, resistance to Maratha dominance would be assisted by the reinforcement of ties to Gond guerillas who could blackmail the Bhosle rajas by disrupting trade and production in their territory; ties that were more easily maintained by Rajgonds than by Rajputs. The ideas, ambitions and strategies of such groups will be discussed more fully in chapter 7.

General conclusion

The central Indian forests have long been viewed as a pristine country, untouched by the commercial and agricultural life of the plains, and inhabited by peoples but lately forced from their primeval ways. This chapter has examined the two biggest groups of tribes of this region, and shown how their identities and lifeways shaped, and were shaped by, their participation in a regional political economy. It has also sought to track the varying paths traced by these ethnicities in the two centuries that saw the rise and fall of Mughal power in Southern India, and also the destruction of its Maratha successors by the British regime. Their fate under colonial rule forms the theme of chapter 8.

[70] Hislop, *Papers*, pp. 5, 4. On the other hand, this might be the wishful thinking of a hopeful missionary.
[71] Wills, *Raj Gond Maharajas*, p. 6.

6 The central Indian forest under early British rule

Introduction

The previous chapter has already brought the narrative up to the commencement of direct British rule on the southern fringes of the Bhil country (annexed 1818), and indirect rule of the southern Gond lands (governed 1818–1830; annexed 1854). As we shall see, the new regime initially largely conformed to previous practice, and employed a mixture of bribery, force and intrigue to control the forest lands and their inhabitants. Chapter 5 noted that the crisis of the agrarian order had been relatively mild in the Nagpur region, and much severer in Khandesh. As a result, the efforts at settlement and resultant documentation are much more abundant for the latter, and it will figure prominently in this chapter. There was, none the less, a marked similarity in the historic trajectory of the two regions.

Both the ambitions and the capacities of the new government exceeded those of its predecessors, and these differences are discussed in the third section below. Its persistent pressure gradually destroyed both the natural and the political environment which had sustained the militant kingdoms at the margin of the sown: the processes whereby this was achieved are described in the fourth and fifth sections. These tides of change silently swamped the traditional order even in remote backwaters like the Dangs and Akhrani, and the last two sections of the chapter provide integrated histories of these regions from the eighteenth century to the late twentieth. The main thrust of these concluding sections is to demonstrate how the twentieth-century isolation of 'remote jungle tribes' was an artefact of colonial rule rather than survival of some remote epoch.

Early strategies of the colonial government

Having occupied Khandesh in 1818, the British regime had to deal with the Bhils, who seem to have resorted to their usual tactic of raiding from

the shelter of the hills preparatory to essaying a settlement of claims with the new government. His inability to suppress them drove John Briggs, the first Collector of that district into a fury exceeding anything expressed by Trimbakji Dengle. Briggs described the Bhils as

> [p]ersons born outcasts from the mass of society, bad in the practice of crimes of the deepest dye; such as robbery, murder, habitual drunkenness, lying, deceit and other immoral habits, cannot, it is expected be speedily reclaimed; indeed nothing but a dread of severe punishment, and the little chance of avoiding detection, can effect this reform, however ample may be the means of obtaining a livelihood by honest industry.[1]

Briggs and his successors in the district adopted a strategy recognisably similar to that of their Maratha predecessors: leading chiefs were offered dues and pensions provided they kept the peace and assisted in policing; and lesser Bhils were encouraged to settle in the villages as watchmen and labourers.

The relation between topography and politics was obvious to British administrators as it had been to their indigenous predecessors; Elphinstone, for example, commented in 1822, that the Bhils were 'a wild and predatory tribe, and though they live quietly in the open country, they resume their character, when they are settled in a part that is strong, either from hills or from jungles'.[2] J. P. Willoughby, attempting to subdue certain chieftains in the mountains between Khandesh and the princely state of Baroda, reported in 1823 that their capture was difficult due to three causes:

> 1st, the difficult nature of the country in which they are concealed; 2nd, the assistance they undoubtedly receive from the inhabitants of the villages . . . and 3rd, the difficulty which, on this account, exists of procuring correct intelligence of their movements.

The first obstacle could be remedied (he continued) only in March or April (the dry season) 'when the jungles may in some degree be cleared by burning them'. He also planned to employ a Bhil chief and forty men to secure information, but since he did not think these expedients would result in the capture of the rebels, he had already begun negotiations to induce their surrender.[3] Apart from greater persistence and tenacity, there is therefore little to distinguish Willoughby's tactics from those of Sukhatme or other Maratha officials.

Elphinstone wrote in 1822:

> The plan adopted . . . was to stop the supplies of the Beels, which are all drawn from the plain; to cut off any parties that attempted to issue to plunder, and to make vigorous attacks on the points in the hills, to which the principal Beel

[1] *Papers at the East India House*, IV, pp. 444–5.
[2] Elphinstone, *Report*, p. 2. [3] *SRBG*, 23, pp. 762–3.

Chiefs had retired. These measures soon reduced the Beels to accept the very favorable terms held out to them; which were to forbear their depredations, the Chiefs receiving pensions, and allowances for a certain number of men, and binding themselves to restrain the excesses of their people.[4]

John Malcolm in Malwa made similar arrangements for the hill peoples 'giving them their ancient dues, encouraging cultivation in their Hills, instituting markets for their wood etc., and raising a Bheel Corps composed of the most barbarous of the class and commanded by their own Chiefs'.[5] Malcolm's calculations were set out more bluntly in unpublished official correspondence; where the country was difficult or inaccessible, he wrote to a local officer 'those who possess it have a right to expect better terms than portions of the same class who are more at our Mercy . . .'[6]

Since the chiefs had taken to the hills precisely in order to secure allowances, fees and positions, it is scarcely surprising that many of them accepted such arrangements. However, disputes over both the size of perquisites and over the quiet supplementation of pensions via occasional robberies, soon tested the arrangements, and periodic outbreaks of guerilla war continued around the mountain fringes for several decades. W. S. Boyd, a later Collector of Khandesh, reviewed the history of the Bhils of his district in 1833, and saw the period 1818–1823 as one of failure:

> attempts to conciliate the leaders and their followers with few exceptions failed entirely and force was resorted to; their submission for a time enforced – an irregular Bheel Corps was formed in hopes of drawing the untameable from their evil propensities. It failed of its purpose and was disbanded.

At the time of writing, Boyd assessed the hill Bhils as 'the most turbulent and dangerous', while those settled in the plains still 'scrupled not to enter extensively into gang robberies, but as their fixed abodes and families acted as checks upon their conduct, they could not proceed to the length of the Hill Bheels'. Finally the Tadvi Bhils were to be managed only 'by severe example . . .'[7] Not a great deal had changed since the days of Trimbakji Dengle or Sukhatme – although the greater striking power of the new regime allowed more sweeping actions than were open to the officers of the Peshwa, though the tactics were quite similar. Thus James Outram on investigating a series of armed robberies in the eastern part of Khandesh 'had no doubt that all the Turvee clans were more or less implicated . . .'. 'The Bayard of India' then sought to

[4] Elphinstone, *Report*, p. 4.
[5] John Malcolm, 'Minute', in OIOC, BJP 20 Feb.1828 P/400/15 No.6.
[6] OIOC, Board's Colln. F/4/755, Pt. II, pp. 173–4.
[7] W. S. Boyd, Collr. Khandesh 30 April 1833 OIOC Board's Colln. vol. 1467 no. 57760 pp. 36, 13–14.

preclude mass flight to the hills by sowing dissension among the hill chiefs through disguised emissaries. Having thus prepared the ground, he rounded up 469 men, 94 women and 54 boys; the latter being the wives and children of those who evaded arrest, and they were held as hostages to prevent the absconders from retaliating. With one exception, the pensioned chiefs had been either 'guilty or remiss' with regard to the robberies: a complaint also being made with respect to the Koli naiks of the Sahyadri in the same period.[8]

Such strategic duplicity was indeed widely employed by subaltern claimants to a share of power: the presence of outlaws in the forests gave such political groups a degree of leverage with suzerain power. Marriott, Collector in the northern Konkan found, for example, that the bandit Khandoji Naik had been instigated by Deoba Rao Mukney, a courtier of Jawar state, who aimed at the creation of a post of 'Superintendent of the Police of the Jungle Districts' and the grant of a tax-free village for himself. Various parties to an intricate succession dispute in that state were also connected with the dacoit gangs.[9]

A few years later, in 1829, the problem in the Surat district (which adjoined Marriott's charge) was so acute as to lead the Collector to propose the payment of regular pensions to the Bhil chiefs in order to prevent raids into British territory – a proposal negatived by Malcolm, then Governor of Bombay on the grounds that 'their cupidity would be excited, their obligations would be imperfectly fulfilled and other districts would be disturbed in order to coerce us into similar arrangements . . .'[10] But local officials had already often made such accommodations, and continued to make them well into the nineteenth century – the centralisation of authority desired by Malcolm was slow in coming. That process and its effects forms the theme of the next sections.

Amalgamating the segments: politics and state-formation

Robinson's phrase – from political competition to social banditry – accurately sums up the transition that occurred through the nineteenth century, and his extremely perceptive and original comparison of the enterprises of the activities of the rebels of the 1830s with that of Vasudev Balwant Phadke in 1879 indicates the magnitude of the change.[11]

[8] J. Outram, Bheel Agent to Collr. Khandesh in OIOC, BJP. 26 October 1831, no. 52.
[9] OIOC Board's Colln. vol.1408 no.55606, S. Marriott, Collr. N. Concan to Chief Secretary. 5 March 1824 esp. pp. 95, 106–7.
[10] OIOC, BJP P/440/26 Nos.160, 162.
[11] Robinson 'Adaptation to Colonial Rule', pp. 94–100.

However, the reasons for this transition need to be more completely explored. In discussing Phadke's failure Robinson comments that 'in 1830 social ties were perfectly intact and band recruitment was more readily accomplished'. But gradually the decades of centralising British rule had sapped the basis of the old segmentary polity, and 'created social bandits and rebels out of peasant protesters and men of political ambition'. This interpretation explains the change in the political system essentially as a consequence of British initiative, and that initiative as originating in their distinctive political culture. 'The nature of competition for power in the Maratha State was not transformed until the British rulers began to change the structure of the state with their innovative regulations and law codes.'[12]

The fact itself is, of course, undeniable, but we need to probe the causes of the transformation further. If the Peshwa or Chhatrapati tolerated political competition from local leaders and potentates, was that toleration a normative element of the prevailing political culture, or was it the result of structures of relative power that central authority was unable to alter? Did the British regime simply exercise an already latent authority to transform the political culture of South Asia, or was there a real shift in the balance of power between centre and periphery?

The celebrated Marathi treatise on statecraft – the *Ajnapatra* – stated that *watandars* (hereditary office-holders) were to be regarded as chieftains (*deshnayak*), and co-sharers in the kingdom, but added that they were not to be allowed any authority over the people: this would be a usurpation of the king's role. It went on to warn against persecuting them and seizing their estates as this would be a 'supreme injustice'; on the other hand, it strongly recommended that they be strictly controlled and prevented from enlarging their dues by even a single grain. It also warned the king against ceding his sovereignty by granting away lands, since this would derogate from his title of *bhusvami* – lord of the land.[13] The entire history of the Maratha regime in the eighteenth century illustrates that these ideals were, in practice, difficult to achieve. That rulers none the less aspired to a high degree of centralised control is indicated (among other things) by the very language of official documents. Even when bribes and concessions were being used to win over recalcitrant subjects, the language used was that of humility, fealty and submission. Policy discussions in times of conflict frequently urge that the insurgents' very roots should be cut away; settlements with them resulted from the inability to achieve this desirable end, but even so that impotence was only to be tacitly admitted. When, therefore, British

[12] Ibid., pp. 106–7, 137, 136.
[13] Banhatti (ed.), *Ajnapatra*, pp. 92–6.

officialdom 'viewed the hill naiks as part of a centralised state apparatus inherited from the former regime',[14] it did not mark a dramatic change *in outlook*; what was changing was the ability to enforce its views against the contrary views of the naiks themselves.

So we do need, however, to understand what it was that so enhanced the striking power of the colonial regime, by contrast to its indigenous competitors. This is one major theme of the present chapter – its socio-political consequences are the other. The nineteenth century was to see the deconstruction of a system of political relations between the polities of the forest and the open country that had existed, as we have seen, for centuries past. In order to explain this process, we must necessarily commence with an attempt to understand the structural dynamic of the forest polities in earlier times as well as the process by which they were dismantled in the course of the nineteenth century. After considering the evidence on this issue, we shall consider the effects of political and environmental change upon the forest peoples, and thus carry the narrative into the twentieth century.

To begin with, the dismantling cannot be seen as a direct consequence of the new military techniques employed by the Company Army. These were extremely effective against the armies of the Indian states, but met with little success against the guerilla war waged by the hill and forest peoples on their own ground. D. C. Graham wrote of the campaigns against the Bhils, for example, that

> although the enemy was weak in the field, and unable to stand before the fire of disciplined troops, yet the activity of the half-naked savage evaded the utmost effort of the harnessed soldier; the inaccessible nature of the fastnesses favoured flight and concealment, and the taunting yell of the marauder generally rose high over the protecting cliff, as the baffled and wearied pursuers threaded the last deep dell on their return.[15]

Military strength could, however, still be deployed to ensure that forest peoples would be isolated, and not receive the aid, overt or covert, from neighbouring states that had formerly helped to sustain them. Furthermore, since campaigns against local insurgency would not be interrupted by the diversion of resources against larger political challenges, the colonial regime could mount a sustained pressure against such small risings. These effects may be seen as indirect consequences of the unchallengeable superiority of the British Indian army in pitched battles and sieges. But in addition to these factors there was a new force – forest clearance as consequence of the great sedentarisation that British supremacy was able to impose over much of the sub-continent.

[14] Robinson, 'Adaptation to Colonial Rule', p. 136.
[15] Graham, 'Bheel Tribes of Khandesh', *SRBG*, 26, p. 212.

Shaping a new environment: clearing the forest

The forest margins had shifted back and forth across the Deccan landscape for centuries – but from the middle decades of the nineteenth century they began to roll inexorably backwards – a retreat certainly accelerated by the endeavours of the Forest Department to extract a profit for the state from the process. The destruction of the forest was, as we have seen, initially viewed as an unmixed good by officialdom. When the issue of conservation began to be aired in official circles, R. K. Pringle, Collector of Khandesh informed the Revenue Commissioner that the 'destruction of the Jungle, so far from being looked as an evil, has in that Province rather been considered as a benefit, and measures have been proposed with a view to accelerate it'.[16] As late as 1862, L. R. Ashburner, Collector of Khandesh thought that destruction of the forests was worth some sacrifice of revenue – he suggested the Bhils be given land at a nominal rate for the next twenty years to attract them from neighbouring princely states, so that 'the jungle would gradually disappear and the country become more healthy'.[17] Even after forest conservation had been underway for nearly two decades, the overriding need for political control could sanction the wholesale destruction of forests in parts of the Baroda state, which adjoined Khandesh. The area had seen serious uprisings in 1858–9, and here forest clearance was an important accompaniment of disarmament and pacification. Thus a news report of October 1858 records that 'Wallace Sahib' had demanded fifty labourers to cut down the forests, at which the local officer had protested that they could not be taken away from the fields in the cultivating season. Slightly later, Annaji Krishna informed the Baroda government that when he had sought to mobilise workers for this task, the peasants had protested that the Naikda insurgents would surely kill them if they undertook the work: evidently the rebels were aware of the strategic advantages the forest conferred on them. In February 1859 the British officers seem to have mobilised men to go into the hills and set fire to the forests in order to clear them. A number of urgent letters discuss the despatch of axes for this work.[18]

The effects of change were visible as early as 1858, when the insurgent Bhagoji Naik entered the south-eastern hills, but failed to find any support among the local Bhils, formerly famous as robbers. A later collector of Khandesh remarked that one reason for this

[16] BARD, vol.63/1620 of 1844 p. 117, J. Vibart Rev.Commnr. 23 March 1841.
[17] *SRBG*, 93, pp. 532–3.
[18] V. G. Khobrekar (ed.), *Historical Selections from the Baroda State Records* [Marathi and Gujarati] Pt.II (Baroda Record Office, 1962), pp. 124, 170, 182, 184–7.

was undoubtedly the spread of cultivation ... As cultivation extended it began to leave only the narrow range of actual cliffs as jungle. Outlaw Bhils, like wild animals, require a large extent of jungle in which to hide and from which to sally forth. The Satmala jungles were narrowed to a long and inaccessible strip, and both outlaws and wild animals yielded to cultivation.[19]

In the Satpura range, however, there had been local risings in that period, but a missionary 'expert' was confident that they would not affect the direction of change:

I am not afraid of the work of the civilisation of the Bhillas being permanently injured under the Bombay Government by the hostile movements in 1858 of one or two of their leaders ... The forests are being thinned by their own hatchets. New industrious pursuits await the Bhillas. The plough is taking the place of their bill-hook. Roads are penetrating some of their wild haunts. To a certain extent there has already been heard in their wildernesses the voice of one crying 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord'.[20]

The forests were certainly disappearing rapidly. A Settlement Officer in western Khandesh was led to comment in 1862:

As the climate of the western districts is eminently favourable to vegetation, it seems strange to a casual observer that there should be so great a scarcity of trees all over the district. With the exception of a few insignificant trees surrounding the village sites, not a tree or shrub can be seen for miles and miles in eastern Nundoorbar.[21]

The following decade saw the extension of railways into central India – a process which not only demanded sleepers and (initially) wood-fuel from the forests, but also greatly extended the distance to which timber, charcoal and other bulky products could be profitably exported. The earliest impact was felt in the vicinity of Bombay, but soon extended inland. The combination of security-related clearance with enlarged commercial demand completed the degradation of much woodland. This became evident when detailed forest surveys were actually carried out in the 1880s and early 1890s; their findings for Khandesh were summarised in an 'Office Note':

Mr Dogdson observes that Forests proper exist only on the frontiers of this dist., that in the interior – Sindkheda, Northern Dhulia, Amalner, Erundole, Pachora, Jalgaon and Bhusaval – the so-called forests are mere scrub jungles, which must be classed as pastures except in a small number of instances where they can be treated as Fuel and Fodder Reserves.[22]

[19] A. H. A. Simcox, *A Memoir of the Khandesh Bhil Corps 1825–1891* (Bombay, nd [1912?]), p. 267.
[20] Wilson, *Aboriginal Tribes*, p. 5. Substituting 'landlord' for 'Lord' the prognosis was an accurate one.
[21] *SRBG*, 93, p. 469.
[22] BARD, vol. 89 of 1898, pp. 60–2.

If the forest had dwindled, the political power of the forest dwellers had vanished. The newly created Forest Department began energetically taking control of every kind of untilled land, and the Bhils of Khandesh could not make even a show of resistance. But well before this necessarily slow process began, the new colonial government was faced with the need to manage the forest folk and to assert a level of control over them that the *ancien régime* may have aspired to, but had never actually exercised. A crucial step in this – the destruction of their political organisation – is discussed in the next section.

The expulsion of mercenaries and the disarticulation of forest polities

With the defeat of the Holkars of Indore, the Bhosles of Nagpur and the annexation of the Peshwa's territory in 1818, the colonial regime was able to institute coordinated policies of subjugation and settlement along the the entire periphery of the great Central India forest and its extensions into the Deccan. The mutual suspicion and hostility between the states of the region had led them, as we saw, to shelter, if not encourage the insurgents along their borders. It will be recollected that the Peshwa began preparations for a confrontation with the British in 1817, with the despatch of an emissary to raise the 'Bhils etc.' in order to disrupt British communications and devastate their possessions in the Surat district.[23] The subsequent destruction of the Peshwai and the take-over of the Nagpur kingdom demonstrated the unprecedented military preponderance of the Company, and the inadvisability of harbouring its enemies. This, in turn would dramatically reduce the space for manoeuvre available to the Bhils and other militant folk. Appa Sahib of Nagpur resorted to a time-honoured tactic when he fled into the forests after his defeat in the battles around Nagpur, but these failed to afford an adequate sanctuary. The campaign to hunt him out of the forest also had the much more important object (according to Richard Jenkins) of subjugating its Gond inhabitants.[24]

An important first step in demolishing the political system in whose interstices forest polities had thrived had already been taken in 1816–17 in the campaigns that annihilated the Pindaris as an organised military formation, and either killed their leaders or confined them to petty

[23] Undated memorandum that I believe dates to 1817. K. V. Purandare and S. N. Joshi (eds.), *Marathyanchya Itihasanchi Sadhanen*, pt 25 (Dhule: Rajvade Samshodhana Mandala, 1941), p. 63.

[24] OIOC, Board's Colln. F/4/755 Pt.I R. Jenkins Resident at Nagpur to Gov.-Genl. 3 September 1819, pp. 136–7.

territorial lordships. Subsequent years (especially 1818–20) also saw the seizure and deportation of many of the Arab and other foreign mercenaries who had abounded in Central India. The expulsion of such men was seen as vital to 'pacification' – thus in the aftermath of the campaign against chiefs of the Mahadeo hills, they were all required to dismiss their mercenary soldiers of every description. The generally parsimonious government was even prepared to advance money for this purpose; for example, Jaswant Shah of Harrai, installed in lieu of his refractory uncle Chyne Shah could not give his mercenaries their arrears of pay – the government loaned him the required sum.[25] Thus, throughout the entire forest belt, the mobile and mobilisable military resources available to chiefs and princes of the region were significantly reduced, and they were thrown back on local followings. The military importance of such measures was stressed by the highly experienced James Outram in a report of 1835:

> The Chief strength of the rebel chiefs, the source of their confidence in opposing us and the instigators of feuds, are foreign mercenaries who live by the brawls and warfare they themselves excite. They are chiefly Mukranees, Sindies, Seedies and Gosaies and some Arabs. Of these I believe many are now with the insurgents, who, if not so assisted could oppose our troops with but little effort.[26]

But this drive against the floating soldiery had a profound significance for the internal structures of the little kingdoms of the forest. Rootless professional mercenaries were vital to the existence of centralised polities in such areas. John Malcolm commented that any leader who aspired to permanent authority had to recruit such men in order to check the spirit of equality common among their tribesmen:

> There is a natural spirit of independence in the mountain Bhills, which compells Chiefs who have a desire to establish an authority that supersedes that of the *Tarwis* [headmen] of small colonies, to entertain followers from a distant country. Besides, when the sphere of plunder is extended to any distance from their native wilds, the Bhills are not so fit for such enterprises, as many others of the predatory tribes... Their arms, and their habits are more suited to the ravines, the woods and the mountains amid which they live.[27]

But the change in the political structure by which a petty tyrant replaced a band chieftain would not have been painless for those consigned to the bottom of the ladder, since appropriate hierarchies

[25] OIOC, F/4/755 Pt.2 H. A. Montgomerie to Resdt. at Nagpore, 16 July 1819, pp. 27–8.
[26] Printed in *Source Material for a History of the Freedom Movement in India – Bombay Government Records* (Bombay Government Press, 1958), I, p. 54.
[27] John Malcolm, 'Essay on the Bhills', *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1 (1827), 88.

would have to be established by violence. An early Bhil Agent in Khandesh observed this process in 1824:

> With the utmost deference I beg to submit, what my long experience with the Bheels may be permitted to plead as my excuse for offering for consideration. No Native Chief, either the acknowledged or nominal head of any of the Bheel tribes, possesses any real authority other than that of the conviction entertained by the mass of the population of his ability to aid their aggressions, his power to screen their delinquencies, or to coerce and effectually to curb and punish their irregularities. All of the Rajpoot Rajas, and most of the other petty Chiefs, the population of whose districts and villages are principally composed of Bheels, entertain a greater or less number, in proportion to their means of payment, of the most abandoned, worthless and profligate description of Seebundies [mercenary infantry]. The tyranny and oppression exercised by these Chiefs thus supported, joined to the endless petty exactions and haughtiness of these armed miscreants, is one principal source of the miserable poverty so generally and lamentably existing among the Bheels ... The countenance of Government afforded to any one of these Rajas greatly magnifies the evil, by placing him above the fear of any armed combination ... During the time I have been honoured with this command, the Bheels crowd to me for redress of their numerous grievances, their complaints are attentively considered, and if (which is almost invariably the case) they have been aggrieved, my utmost influence is exerted with their Chief, and I have seldom failed to obtain for them redress ...

That the rajas were following a well-defined strategy is shown by Rigby's further remark that 'having stripped the Bheel of his little all, they will supply him with a little food, and provide him with arrows, urging and exciting him to rob and plunder; of the fruits of which they receive the principal portion'. Thus it was alleged, for example, that the Raja of Rajpipla had received upwards of a lakh of rupees as his share of the plunder of Khandesh from Jiva Vasava, who presumably levied it from his followers.

This chronic fiscal drain, in turn, would preclude the sedentarisation that might rob the Bhil of those qualities that made him formidable. Once settled, they would gradually cease to be the men Rigby described, who 'can prepare a meal from wild pulse, the seeds of grass, roots and berries, and if by accident a little tobacco and salt are obtained are in the enjoyment of luxury, whose scanty clothing is a mere span of the coarsest cloth, whose armouries crowd whole forests ...'[28] On the other hand, bands of such men could not pose a serious threat to chiefs guarded by mercenary soldiers from Arabia and elsewhere, as long as their employer could afford to pay for these expensive imports. Needless to say, such an exact balance of forces must be seen as more often sought than accomplished: desertion, mutiny, betrayal and assassination

[28] *SRBG*, 23, Capt.G. A. Rigby, Commanding Field Detachment to Collr. Khandesh, 27 February 1824, pp. 752–4.

were far from uncommon in the kaleidoscopic world that we are describing, and money was crucial to survival in it.

But money had to come ultimately from transit trade and agrarian production. In its beginnings, a forest chiefdom might exact tribute from lands it could ravage, but not control; but with success, it might well begin to encourage the formation of a settled peasantry within its territory as a source of taxes, labour and provisions. Ideally, a successful kingdom would have dense forests on its frontiers to shelter the raiders it despatched to levy blackmail on the country beyond, and tilled fields, towns and craftsmen in the interior, where the monarch would reside in appropriate splendour. The kingdoms we studied in chapter 3 had moved along this trajectory. The king of the 'Colle' attacked by the Portuguese in 1583 seems to have come close to achieving this pattern. The core territory, we may recall, lay well inland, and the route was a difficult one, through mountain forests, 'dense, rough and intractable'.

Of course, the chiefs would not lightly abandon a proven strategy. The British checked the flow of plunder and tribute from the plains and replaced it with the halting trickle of colonial pensions and timber fees. Chiefs would then have to bear harder on their subjects, which would require the deployment of mercenaries without local ties to enforce their demands. Hence it is not surprising that banished mercenaries gradually trickled back when British vigilance was relaxed. So, in 1845, when the post of Western Bheel Agent was re-established, the Agent

> found the Western Mehwasee Chiefs surrounded with bands of worthless, unruly mercenaries, Arabs, Sindees, Mukranees, &c., all clamorous for large sums, which they demanded as their wages, and in payment of cash loans they had given their employers, at enormous rates of interest. The seven Mehwasee Chiefs were entirely in the power of these men.

The Agent made a settlement of the claims and had the men sent to Bombay for despatch to their countries of origin, and took security from the chiefs against their once again entertaining such followers. Local British officers also intercepted pensions and dues in order to recover moneylenders' debts from the chiefs, and this would also reduce the latter's capacity to maintain their followings.[29] Thus the kingly aspirations of the chiefs were broken on the wheel of the colonial juggernaut. As a consequence their status and power declined. The new administration indeed actively aimed at breaking the tribesmen's links with their leaders. So in the 1820s, the Bhil Agents took on the general superintendence of the Bheels and petty chiefs, and also the assessment and collection of the dues payable to them by the villagers.

[29] *SRBG*, 26, 'Bheel Tribes of Khandesh' continuation by J. Rose, pp. 238, 239.

> The main features therefore, in this theory of reformation, were the awarding [*sic*] strict justice to an oppressed race, *the overthrow of the patriarchal authority of the Naiks, and the substitution in their stead of a European Chief*, who should be equally respected and obeyed . . .[30]

The pensioned chiefs and their descendants found adaptation to the new judicial and political system difficult, and, like rural gentry in much of India, many fell into debt and lost their status and connections. The effect of such repeated interventions by government officials (and the civil courts), could not but be to undermine the authority of the chiefs, and indeed as is evident from Rigby's comments cited earlier, this was indeed his object. Over much of the hill country these processes, together with other changes that we shall consider later in this chapter, effectively broke down chiefly authority, and so at the beginning of the twentieth century an experienced and knowledgeable Collector of Khandesh could write that

> [t]here are a certain number of hereditary Bhil chieftains, but they have little real power. The leaders who arose from time to time, organised forces, and preyed on the country, were invariably men who attracted attention by some act of individual daring, generally robbery with murder. They would retreat to the hills, and gather round them a band of desperadoes . . .[31]

Vestigial authority: the Dangs 1850–1991

But these were sporadic outbreaks could never achieve a revanche. Real authority in much of the old Bhil country had passed, as we shall see in the next chapter, into the hands of local officials of the Forest and Police Departments, and their allies the moneylenders, liquor dealers and forest contractors. In a few areas, too remote and fever-ridden for direct colonial control, chieftainship survived as merely the headship of a dominant caste, the chiefs preserving their authority only by sharing it among all who remained 'Bhil' and did not take to settled agriculture. This was the case in the Dangs, where in return for upholding the rajas' authority, the Bhils paid no taxes.[32]

Ajay Skaria's fine study of the Dangs through the nineteenth century sees this as being an ancient pattern, in which 'power was wielded by chiefs who shared it extensively with other members of their community, often known as *bhauband* . . .'[33] I would argue that, in fact, this pattern

[30] *SRBG*, 26, Graham, 'Bheel Tribes', p. 214. Emphasis added.
[31] Simcox, *Khandesh Bhil Corps*, p. 13.
[32] D. Hardiman, 'Power in the Forest: The Dangs 1820–1940', in D. Arnold and D. Hardiman (eds.), *Subaltern Studies VIII* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 103.
[33] A. Skaria, 'A Forest Polity in Western India: The Dangs 1800s to 1920s', Unpublished PhD thesis Cambridge University, 1992, p. 3.

was a product of colonial rule that steadily squeezed out the rootless mercenary soldiers who had previously served to buttress chiefly authority, and whose presence has bulked so large in our discussion of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Such men also figure prominently in the English records down to the mid nineteenth century, and it is strange that Skaria has failed to notice this evidence. It is a great virtue of his work that it seeks to historicise the construction of the forest tribal identity – 'the creation of those splendidly isolated, timeless, primitive, inward-looking creatures of early colonial imagination known as the wild tribes . . .'[34] but he has none the less succumbed to the same stereotype. The sharing of authority and revenue with the clan-fraternity (*bhauband*) so carefully described by Skaria was resorted to precisely because the independent power afforded by Arab or Sindi *sibandies* was no longer available. Malcolm, we may recollect, had remarked that Bhil chiefs who aspired to authority greater than that of the heads of small villages needed to employ foreign soldiers. As the latter became unavailable, the political system in the Dangs became that described by Skaria – a confederacy of local band chiefs, held together by a sense of ethnic dominance and the (colonially enforced) sharing of timber dues and petty pensions. The flow of tribute and spoil from the open country having dried up, income had to be locally generated by encouraging the immigration of a subordinate peasantry – the Koknis; it is significant that their numbers grew after the 1870s, as colonial rule tightened its hold on plains and hills alike.[35] The Koknis practised plough tillage – and so the kingly Bhils eschewed it, as well as all forms of supervised, and therefore servile, labour.

The Bhils' pretensions irritated the true ruler of the tract – a British forest officer – who wrote in 1880 that the Dang Bhils

> have a very high idea of their dignity as Rajas and Rajas' kith and kin. The Konkanis and Varlis are not above helping about camp and carrying loads. But the Bhil Rajas never condescend to such work, fit only for their subjects, and when they are not resting or idling, wander about with their bows and arrows in search of small game such as peacocks and hares. Thoroughly unwilling to work they do little cultivation, and live on the share they take of the harvests of their so-called ryots [subjects] the Konkanis and Varlis.[36]

In times of scarcity, taxation crossed the hazy boundary into robbery. During the famine of 1899–1901 it was observed that the Bhils 'managed to extort quantities of grain from the unfortunate cultivating

[34] Skaria, 'A Forest Polity', p. 114.
[35] Ibid., p. 161.
[36] *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency XII: Khandesh*, p. 103.

classes'.[37] This may have contributed to the extraordinarily high death-rate among the forest communities. From the late nineteenth century on, the colonial regime occasionally interfered to check such practices, but major changes (according to Skaria) had to await forest demarcation and the more thoroughgoing control that followed it from 1902 onward. The forest department now sometimes even prevented the Bhils from collecting their dues directly from the Koknis, instead collecting and disbursing the money itself. By this and other means, it established itself in a situation where it could compulsorily exact all the labour it needed for its operations.[38]

Bhils still sporadically exercised their seigneurial rights. So, when a village study team from the Census of India visited Ghadvi in 1960, they learned that in the recent past

> The political status and authority of the Rajas entitled them to levy taxes on their economically advanced ryots who adopted a superior type of cultivation by ploughs and bullocks. The relations between the Bhils and their subjects were never cordial. The Bhil Rajas many a time oppressed their subjects with the help of their bowmen, and took possession of their crops, cattle, food, and even their girls.[39]

The Dangs were, of course, an exceptional area; elsewhere all these had been the perquisites of the colonial bureaucracy and its moneyed auxiliaries.

Meanwhile, after independence, a new elite began to take shape in the region and even the vestigial authority of the chiefs disappeared. Literacy had not been part of a kingly life-style, and the mission schools in the Dangs had to draw their pupils from outside the region. However the number of schools increased dramatically in the 1950s – partly as result of the Maharashtrian-Gujarati controversy – and the first Dangi to acquire a Secondary School Certificate did so in 1964. By 1970 508 of them had passed Vernacular Final or higher examinations. Unfortunately for them, the great boom in Government employment was already over, and many reserved posts were filled by tribal and non-tribal 'outsiders'. Educated local youths then raised the 'Dangs for the Dangis' demand, directed especially against another South Gujarat scheduled tribe – the Dhodias.[40] Educated young men also began to act as political leaders, but many more of them were drawn from the Kokni Kunbis than the Bhils, this in turn being related to the former's earlier sedentarisation. By the 1980s they were far ahead of other tribal groups

[37] Cited in Skaria, 'A Forest Polity', p. 174.
[38] Ibid., pp. 274–6, 260–1.
[39] Census of India 1961: *Village Survey Monograph – Ghadvi, District Dangs*, p. 2.
[40] Ghanshyam Shah, 'Growth of Group Identity Among the Adivasis of Dangs', *Journal of the Gujarat Research Society*, 24 (1972), 168–73.

and occupied 'important positions in district level cooperatives and other organisations'. These were used in the interests of 'caste dominance, prestige and control'.[41] For many years, a Kokni, Ramu Thakre dominated the local Forest cooperatives and other organisations so effectively as to be 'the uncrowned king of the Dangs'. However, as forest operations dwindled, and seasonal migration to the Gujarat plains grew, the Dangi identity began to emphasised in order to limit competition from the (Maharashtrian) Khandeshis in that overcrowded market.[42] As Jan Breman has pointed out, the maintenance of 'primordial' identities is best explained by the scarcity of paying employment and not by the 'force of tradition'.[43] Constituting 45 per cent of the population and with a lead in education and land control, the Koknis clearly constitute a dominant group that can maintain itself unless challenged from without – a challenge which may always be met with the 'Dangs for the Dangis' slogan.

The Akhrani plateau: from regional fulcrum to sylvan backwater 1750–1971

The processes of political disarticulation and rearticulation that we have been describing, as well as their reflection in official ideology and record are best documented in the case of the Akhrani. This region, currently a sub-division of Dhule district in Maharashtra, had evidently been the seat of some regional power in the early medieval period, as there were ruined temples and a reservoir on the commanding Turanmal plateau.[44] The subsequent fate of that power is unknown, but a little kingdom ruled by a Rajput Rana had come into existence by the mid eighteenth century, and the tract was described as a *mahal*, a revenue unit, in the records. Akhrani town itself lies on an undulating plateau, which, like most of western India before the nineteenth century, was accessible only to pack animals. The plateau overlooked the plains of Taloda and Sultanpur to the south, and sloped down to the Narmada river in the north. Two of the Peshwa's officials in western Khandesh described it (in 1815–16) as an area of great strategic importance:

> A tract like this one having come into government hands enables the maintenance of control in the region from Kukarmunda on one side to Badwani

[41] S. P. Punalekar, *Agricultural Profile of Dangs District* (Surat: Centre for Social Studies, 1989), p. 9.
[42] I am indebted to Dr Satyakam Joshi of the Centre for Social Studies, Surat for this information.
[43] J. Breman, *Wage Hunters and Gatherers* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 21.
[44] *Working Plan for the Satpuda Forests: North and East Khandesh Divisions* (Bombay Government Central Press, 1920), p. 3.

on the other, and beyond, up to the Narmada; furthermore, the passes leading to Hindustan, Gujarat etc. will also come into our hands.[45]

The process of state-formation on the plateau was relatively advanced by the eighteenth century, probably because the ruling lineage made good use of its strategic position and the opportunities afforded by the retreat of Mughal power from the peninsula. During that troubled interregnum, the Akhrani Ranas came to control the important town and mart of Taloda and several other villages in the plains. In a letter written to a Maratha official in 1768–69, the Rana Himatsingji wrote that his father had ceded the *kasba* of Taloda to the addressees' father at some unspecified time in the past. However, the current Rana had evidently tried to retake the town, and a conflict had ensued, ending in the Maratha capture of Akhrani fort and occupation of the entire kingdom. It was restored to the Rana on condition of his ceding two additional villages as well as ratifying the previous cession of Taloda. The Rana was therefore effectively confined to the upland plateau.[46] It is quite likely that the rulers of the shrunken kingdom now began to encourage agriculture and crafts as a revenue source, leading to the settlement of the Mutwaria, Burda and Dorepi in that tract, who as D. C. Graham noted in the early nineteenth century, 'became despised [by the other Bhils] on account of their skill in basket-weaving and cultivation'.[47]

We lose sight of Akhrani for some decades, but it figures prominently in the time of troubles that commenced at the turn of the eighteenth century, when its rulers used their strategic position to plunder and levy tribute both north and south. Writing in 1814–15, Sukhatme, posted at Kukarmunda reported to the Peshwa that while the Rana of the more accessible Bodawal territory had submitted, the Akhrani Rana had only nominally done so. The previous year (Sukhatme continued) he had plundered three villages in the Peshwa's territory, as well as two others belonging to Holkar, and caused great destruction.[48]

A later newsletter of the same year reported that the Rana Narsingh's regional rivals had combined against him: these included the Gaekwad state (which had a base at Songadh), the Raja of Rajpimple and Jiva Vasava of Valvi. Narsingh's forces were small, and he was defeated and fled. Sukhatme was evidently aware of the possibility of exploiting this situation, and maintained a correspondence with the Akhranikar, Jiva

[45] PA, Sanika Rumal 35, Pudke 1, doc. 18789.
[46] *Itihasa Sangraha: Sanadapatrantil Mahiti*, 7 (1915–16), 219.
[47] Graham, 'Bheel Tribes' *SRBG* 26, p. 206. Burud in fact means basket-maker; Matwaria clearly indicates an origin in the Matwar region north of the Narmada – perhaps these were refugees from the turmoil in Malwa.
[48] PA Sanika Rumal 26, Pudke 3 doc. 13960.

Vasava and other turbulent (*mavasi*) chiefs.[49] Narsingh may have died, or been killed soon after, for the next document to mention the Rana of Akhrani calls him Bhimsingh.[50] The new ruler may well have owed his elevation to Devji Naik, a chieftain whom we encountered earlier as an ally of Jaswantrao Holkar of Indore (see above pp. 115–16). Devji Naik, here described as a personal follower *(shagird)* of the Rana evidently decided to take personal control of the state, captured both the ruler and his fort, and subsequently put Bhimji to death.[51] He then began recruiting Arabs and mustering Bhils, and moved down into the plains of Taloda – most probably because the wooded uplands would not yield the money and supplies necessary for him to sustain his forces. Sukhatme, who had evidently been watching the situation, advanced to the foot of the hills and cut off Devji's supplies. The latter had employed a number of Arab mercenaries, and the latter, lacking the Bhil ability to forage, seem to have felt the pinch. At any rate, their leaders sent emissaries to the Maratha commander Kadar Bhaldar, offering to make Devji submit if the Peshwa's government would give them their arrears of pay, stated at Rs.25,000. Sukhatme (through Kadar Bhaldar) bargained and agreed to pay Rs.12,000, and despatched an officer with some troops and the money. Devji now began a counter-intrigue with the Arabs, but this being discovered he was seized at midnight and fettered.[52] A garrison was then sent to occupy Akrani. The mother and nephew of the dead Rana Bhimji had been imprisoned by Devji Naik; they now approached Kadar Bhaldar, offering to reimburse the cost of the settlement if the state was restored to them. This was referred to the Peshwa for his orders.[53] However, the crises generated by the mounting British pressure on the Peshwa probably prevented any decision, and during the war of 1817–18, the supposed son of the dead Rana Bhimji arrived from Baroda. He enlisted a number of Arab mercenaries, and re-established himself in Akrani.

Unable to pay his troops, he threw himself on the mercy of Captain Briggs, the Political Agent, who paid off his men and occupied Dhadgaon and Akrani. The young chief, who was little better than an idiot, failed to pay the ... Rs.18,000

[49] PA, Sanika Rumal 26, Pudke 3, doc. 14003 (1813–14).

[50] *Khandesh Gazetteer* calls him Bhikaji – this is an evidently a misreading of a Modi document. The Peshwa Daftar original documents clearly show it as Bhim e.g. Sanika Rumal 28, Pudke 8, doc. 15787.

[51] PA, Sanika Rumal 28, Pudke 8, doc. 15787.

[52] Devji evidently made his peace with the Peshwa's government and continued to maraud; in 1818 Briggs, the first British collector in Khandesh bought him off with a pension of of 6.50 rupees a month and the grant of the village of Chikhli. *SRBG*, 26, 'Synopsis of the Bheel Settlement in Khandesh', p. 229.

[53] PA, Sanika Rumal 13, Pudke 1, doc. 18789; Kadar Bhaldar's own despatch is Rumal 26, Pudke 5, doc. 14152. These transactions took place in 1814–15.

advanced to him, and the management of his estate was assumed by the British Government.[54]

In effect, therefore, Sukhatme's manoeuvre was replicated by the new regime, with more lasting effect.

The area was left largely to the despotism, benevolent or otherwise, of local officials down to mid-century, and a plough-tax was exacted from what the *Khandesh Gazetteer* (1880) described as 'an active, hard-working and increasing population . . .' For the late nineteenth-century compiler, such positive traits among forest folk had to be derived from an infusion of 'superior' blood, and so the Akrani Pavras were credited with 'probably . . . part Rajput descent'.[55]

As railways and feeder roads traversed other lines of country, an unprecedented isolation fell upon the Akrani – an isolation that brought tremendous suffering during the great famine of 1899–1900. The Dhadgaon sub-division had 23, 040 inhabitants in 1891; the Census of 1901 found only 5,697 left. A few had emigrated, but most of those missing were dead.[56] Akrani's communications were no worse than they had ever been, but it did not share in the communications revolution of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A forest working plan of 1918 classed almost the whole of it as inaccessible forest – but this inaccessibility was more an economic than a geographical fact. Felling by the forest department between 1877 and 1884 had exhausted the valuable timber and so 'expenditure began to increase to such an extent as to make further work inadvisable.' Forty years later the verdict was that 'the quality of the growing stock, both teak and other valuable timber species, is so poor as not to justify any expensive schemes of communication with markets situated between 40 and 100 miles away'.[57] This economic marginality permitted a regime of benign neglect to survive in this area. The new power hierarchy that replaced the Ranas and their mercenaries was so 'natural' in the eyes of visiting officials that they failed to notice it. Instead, they saw what they expected to see in an 'isolated backwater' – simple, primitive people living among primeval forests. When the Survey Settlement was introduced into the sub-division, the erudite Settlement Officer wrote:

Except for a few Mahars, the population consists of Bhils and Pawras whose jargon, a mixture of Gujarati, Marathi and Hindi proclaims them to be the remnants of vanquished races, driven to the hospitality and protection of this rude land by the oppression and terror of the conquering hordes who established

[54] *Khandesh Gazetteer*, p. 424.
[55] Ibid., p. 422.
[56] BARD (Famine), vol. 15 of 1901, pp. 170–1.
[57] *Working Plan for the Satpuda Forests: North and East Khandesh* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1920), pp. 16, 8.

themselves on the fertile valleys of the Narbada and the Tapti. Naturally indolent, they have done nothing for centuries, except just carry on life with a minimum of wants requiring a still smaller minimum of effort.[58]

A decade later, David Symington, author of a famous report on the tribal areas also saw Akrani as a refuge area, where the pernicious effects of the judicial process and economic change had failed to penetrate, and the inhabitants were 'free, independent, truthful and law-abiding'. Any improvement in communications would lead to 'exploitation and victimisation ...'[59] So 'at any rate for the next generation, we must regard the aboriginal as being in the nursery. Like a child he must be protected against outside interference and victimization, and like a child he must be taught how to hold his own'.[60] The fact that the resident forest officer in Akrani was practically a petty sovereign does not seem to have struck Symington. In his memoirs, he wrote that this man was also 'revenue officer, magistrate, and excise inspector. It was a system which worked well.'[61] This official would certainly also have been Symington's host and guide, and perhaps the source of his quaint notion that the Forest Department functioned partly with 'the humanitarian aim of helping Bhils so far as may [have been] consistent with the needs of the forest'.[62] As late as 1970, when L. K. Bharatiya carried out his survey of the Akrani, forest guards behaved 'like little Hitlers'; however, as a consequence of Sarvodaya work and the development of electoral competition the local people were 'determined to meet the challenge of exploitation and vested interests.' In 1970, their social identities were still linked with the defunct kingdoms of central India: the Pawras 'claim[ed] that they [were] real Rajputs and came from Udaipur' around 1600 CE.[63] Two decades later however, other visitors were told that the tribals' 'links with the river valley were timeless'.[64]

[58] *SRBG*, 644 (N. S.), *Papers relating to the Original Settlement of the Akrani Mahal of the West Khandesh District* Rept. dt. 19 January1927, p. 4.

[59] D. Symington, *Report on the Aboriginal and Hill Tribes of the Partially Excluded Areas of the Bombay Presidency* (Bombay Government, 1938), pp. 28, 10. Symington, of course had a certain agenda, which was to establish that Indians still needed to be protected from each other.

[60] Ibid., p. 2.

[61] John Halliday (pseud.), *A Special India* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), p. 150.

[62] Symington, *Report*, p. 10.

[63] L. K. Bharatiya, 'Adivasis of Dhadgaon in Akrani', *Journal of the Gujarat Research Society*, 33, (1971), 180, 187–8, 174.

[64] Morse, *Report of the Independent Review*, p. 69.

7 Identities and aspirations – not noble savage but savage noble

Introduction

So far we have looked at the forest peoples largely from an external perspective – an attitude frequently dictated by the nature of the available sources. Nevertheless, the reader will have observed that certain assumptions have implicitly been made about the understandings and aspirations of these peoples and their chiefs: notably, their ability and desire to use their habitat, knowledge and skills to secure integration at the warrior level of the social hierarchy. However, precisely because such integration was based upon the obfuscation of origins, success would leave few traces in the historical record. In seeking to understand the values and motivations of the specialist communities of the woodlands, we must therefore risk falling into anachronism, and all too often read earlier evidence in the light of later knowledge.

We may begin by considering the earliest evidence available – the rich tradition of painting that, over several millennia, came to adorn rock-shelters and similar locations in central India. In early historic times the motifs come to include scenes of war involving horses and chariots, archers and serried ranks of spearmen. There are also depictions of processions with elephants and attendants. The panoply of early kingship clearly had a certain fascination for these itinerants of the forest fringe – and indeed may have been designed to have such an effect by kings not long removed from the forest themselves.[1] The horses and elephants are especially significant: in ancient and medieval India these were animals meant for war and display. Equally, therefore, the Bhil fascination with the horse noted by John Malcolm at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the fact that many of their legends featured sagacious horses leading the hero to success, again suggests aspirations towards warrior status on their part. Earthenware horses were also

[1] S. K. Pandey, *Indian Rock Art* (Delhi: Aryan Books 1993), plate 39.

widely used votive offerings in Gondwana, and Hislop thought it a peculiarly 'aboriginal' culture trait. However, the pioneers of iron-age agriculture in Vidarbha (eighth to third centuries BCE) sacrificed horses with some of their dead. Poorer men were buried with at least some bit of horse gear to accompany them in the next world.[2] Such practices should perhaps be read as markers of the early participation of forest folk in sub-continental culture.

The status of the horseman was lordly one. A similar aspiration to kingship may be seen in the numerous Bhil origin legends that sought to trace ancestry to a chief or prince exiled into the forest.[3] Indeed, this was not confined to the Bhils; the Thakurs of the Sahyadri told John Wilson that they were constituted by the Thakuras (lords) of Gujarat, who fled into the forest at the Muslim conquest 'and induced considerable numbers of the Hindus of different tribes to join their standard, and to bind themselves by an oath to support their cause'.[4] However, for fear of the Kolis, this legend was neutralised by the other one (already cited, see p. 53) in which they tabooed anything smacking of martial pursuits – especially the horse.

Microprocesses of self-promotion

Status is of course not to be acquired merely by telling stories about one's community or oneself; the persistent strategic deployment of power and wealth is needed to accumulate the social capital we term status. It is fortunate that the case of Umaji Naik (carefully recorded by Mackintosh and Athavale) enables us to get a glimpse of the microprocesses involved in doing this. To begin with there was nomenclature; while Mackintosh, writing after Umaji's final rebellion and death, consistently refers to him as 'Oomaiah', that is, giving his name a 'low' Kannada termination of 'ayya', Umaji himself used the northern honorific 'ji', and added the title 'Naik' (chief), and this form was used in letters to and from government authorities.[5] In documents meant for the eyes of lesser folk, Umaji was more grandiloquent – for example, in the written award as the head of a *gota* (caste authority) assembled at Purandhar in March 1829, Umaji Naik and his brother Bhujaji Naik head the document with the title 'Rajshri'.[6] Others writing to them sometimes also used that title, but when he broke out in rebellion a

[2] Hislop, *Papers*, p. 21; G. B. Deglurkar and G. P. Lad, *Megalithic Raipur* (Pune: Deccan College, 1992), pp. 43, 151–2.
[3] Malcolm, 'Essay on the Bhills', p. 79; Hislop, *Papers*, p. 14.
[4] Wilson, *Aboriginal Tribes*, pp. 20–1.
[5] This may be seen in many of the papers in the appendix to Athavale, *Umaji Raje*.
[6] 'Umaji Naikanche kahi patren', pp. 16–17.

second time, references to 'Umaiah' begin to appear in government records.[7] Those seeking his assistance gave him higher title; for example, 'Isubkhan son of Babumia' evidently a claimant to the petty state of Janjira, sought his help in some enterprise, and addressed the letter to '*ajay amram meharban bhai Umaji Naik va Bhujaji Naik* . . .'[8] Umaji was an adept practitioner of this nomenclatural politics. During his earlier revolt, he had substituted Raje in place of Naik in his name, but reverted to Naik after reaching an agreement with the British.[9] It is against this background that the names used by various Bhil chiefs in the 1820s become significant; almost uniformly, they conform to 'Rajput' type.[10]

A name might survive even after its meaning and the aspiration it embodied had been worn away by economic and political decline. So, for example, Ajay Skaria was told in the Dangs that there was 'only one major Bhil clan in the region – the Dharegad Pawars'. In a footnote, he adds that there

> is the curious case of the Amala chiefs, who described themselves as being of the Suryavanshi *kul* and claim Rajput descent. Several members of the Amala *bhauband* still describe themselves as Dharegad Pawars. It is likely that the claim to be from the Suryavanshi *kul* is a recent one, and is closely connected to the increasing assertion by Bhil chiefs in the region, of Rajput links.[11]

The very name Dharegad Pawar is, in fact, evidence of an earlier such effort at Rajputisation – it obviously refers to the famous Pawar (Paramara) clan and the great fortress (*gad*) of Dhar in Malwa. However, when aspirations to regional power had been abandoned in the face of colonial power, the name evidently survived locally as that of a Bhil clan, and so the Amala chiefs had to start the process of Rajputisation afresh by claiming to be Suryavanshi. Skaria's presumption that external influences and ideals had to be recent evidently led him to miss this obvious clue.

Behavioural change also had to supplement nomenclatural change if the new name was not to become ridiculous: so Umaji set out to assert his superior status by taking on judicial functions – issuing summons, judging cases and levying fines. He also evidently set out to elevate his standing relative to the Brahmans, whose local dominance in the period of the Peshwai had placed them at the top of both the secular and the ritual hierarchies. In conversation with them Umaji vaunted that his prowess was greater than that of the late Peshwa, who had, after all, succumbed to the British whom Umaji had successfully defied. He also

[7] Compare Athavale, Umaji Raje, appendix, p. 228 and p. 239 for examples.
[8] Ibid., p. 277, no date.
[9] Ibid., pp. 253–4.
[10] *SRBG*, 26, pp. 181–95.
[11] Skaria, 'A Forest Polity', p. 27 and n. 79.

entered their houses, shared the carpets they sat on, touched them familiarly, and 'they dared not offer any resistance ...' Umaji also shrewdly chose to launch a public attack on the local Brahman executive officer since, if that individual admitted his claims, no other upper-caste person would stand out against him. The episode recorded by Mackintosh, in which Umaji entered the Brahman's kitchen and demanded food as a fictive kinsman from the latter's wife, would have gone far, especially if repeated, to slough off Umaji's low-caste status, and to separate him and his clan from the admittedly low folk whose presence would pollute the kitchen, or, indeed the very verandah of a Brahman. On the other hand, he also sent donations to the Brahmans at Jejuri and bestowed alms on mendicants who appeared before him.[12]

The Ramoshis' position in the local police was already leading them to domineer over the village servant caste of Mahars. One of Umaji's early associates went into outlawry because he beat, and accidentally killed, a Mahar woman who refused his peremptory summons to perform unpaid labour.[13] The keeping of mistresses from other castes was also an assertion of superiority over them. Umaji clearly saw the Ramoshis as his special constituency; his proclamation calling on the garrisons of various forts to join his revolt used Ramoshi argot, and ended with an imprecation against anyone who did not circulate the proclamation. The imprecation being that 'he would have been born of the semen of a Mahar or Mang'[14] – a double insult reflecting on both legitimacy and caste rank. It must be evident from all the above, that Umaji's strategy was not to challenge the hierarchy as such, but to elevate himself and the Ramoshis within it. The same may be said of Bhavani, Naro and Rango naiks who terrorised Ahmednagar district around 1803–4. They enlisted Rajputs, Muslims and Mangs as well as Ramoshis, built up a harem from women of all castes, and patronised men of religion, employing a Brahman to expound the *shastra* and 'a Mussulman to explain the koran'. They also dressed like Brahmans and were equally punctilious about prayers and ablutions.[15]

Political overlordship and agrarian settlement

In the preceding section we have looked at a frustrated aspirant to petty kingship. But what was the role of the king? For this we turn to the legends which (before the separation of academic history from 'mere

[12] Mackintosh, 'Ramoossies', *Madras Journal* (July 1835), 220–2.
[13] Mackintosh, 'Ramoossies', *Madras Journal* (Jan. 1835), 6.
[14] Athavale, *Umaji Raje*, appendix, p. 235.
[15] Mackintosh, 'Ramoossies', *Madras Journal* (July 1834), 240.

folklore') everywhere constituted the available knowledge of the past. The message in these is clear – pushing back the jungle and subduing *jangli* were central elements of the kingly role. In the Dakhan, the archetypal founder-king in the memory of both priest and peasant was Hasan Gangu Bahmani, often amalgamated with his successor Ahmad-shah (who founded Bidar) and described as simply the Patshah of Bidar, and the most ancient and respectable claims to vested rights (*watan*) began with him. Before him there were only the timeless heroes such as the Pandavas or Salivahana, more or less contemporary with the demons and demi-gods of folk and Pauranic tradition. Hasan Gangu was early marked by the standard signs of divine favour. The usual cobra came and shielded him from the sun when he was asleep as a youth, and when his predecessor died, the royal she-elephant placed a garland round his neck and declared him the rightful successor. Thus marked out, it was only natural that that Hasan should not only found a great line, but also go on to destroy a ferocious Bhil robber, clear the forest where the latter lived, and build a great city therein; that was what Patshahs were for.[16] Similarly, a legendary history of the north Konkan written in the mid fifteenth century bestowed the role of founder-king on Pratapbimba who conquered the country from Vinaji Ghodel, a raja of low birth (*atishudra*), and found it to be desolate, a great forest extending for 28 *pakka kos* (70–80 miles?). He then brought in respectable folk as settlers and had the forest cleared.[17] The legitimating myths of little chiefs modelled themselves on those of the great: for example the petty ruler of a handful of tribal hamlets in hills of central India informed a visiting official in 1820 that his ancestor Nilakantha came from the north to Chapa and found 'there was much jungle here; he cut down the trees and made a settlement . . .'[18]

It is noteworthy that the Pradhan bards of the Gond tribe also shared this understanding of what constituted civilisation. In the mid nineteenth century Stephen Hislop collected a version of the legend of Lingo, the Gond hero. Lingo was depicted as cutting away the trees, building a city, establishing a market and introducing settled agriculture and the use of carts and oxen.[19] The collection of this legend exactly as

[16] The whole story is told in considerably greater detail in OIOC Mss Mar. G. 4 fols. 15–41. This mss amalgamates several legends and transfers the story of Ahmadabad-Bidar to Ahmadabad in Gujarat. On the other hand, OIOC Mss Add 26, 477A borrows themes from the story of Anhilvada (Gujarat) to narrate the founding of Bidar. I cite these only to highlight the importance of the theme of settling the wild in the legitimation of kingship.

[17] Rajvade (ed.), *Mahikavatichi Bakhar*, pp. 33–4.

[18] OIOC Mss Mar. D. 46 fo. 154a.

[19] Hislop, *Papers*, p. 118.

recited by the bard, rather than rewritten to turn Lingo into a local variant of Shiva, or perhaps an immigrant from Mecca or Karbala marks the arrival of a new style of scholarship in Central India. It is to one of its earliest records that we now turn.

Aspirations and identities in Gondwana

This new western ethnography had definite political agendas, but it none the less has left us a larger body of records than earlier regimes of knowledge permitted. Broadly speaking, under the indigenous regime, social groups in a position to mobilise bards or literati would employ them precisely to bury origins rather than reveal them, and so it is that in order to secure relatively unvarnished reports of aspirations from identifiable forest peoples we have to wait for the arrival of Vinayakrao, research assistant to Richard Jenkins, Resident in, and effectively, governor of, the Nagpur kingdom. But before we consider the materials that he compiled, we need to set the scene for his entry.

The rare testimonies of forest peoples themselves come from a region where the process of clearance was yet again underway, and where the ultimate triumph of agrarian civilisation was far from evident. The circumstances in which this record was generated should also perhaps be clarified: when the first British officials began to take charge of the Nagpur kingdom, the Resident deputed his research assistant, a well-educated Brahman named Vinayakrao, to collect information on the geography, administration, customs etc. of the region. The latter seems to have spent over a decade at this task, and apart from scrutinising inscriptions and local records, much of the information was generated by questioning men of various castes regarding their origins and customs. Their statements were then taken down verbatim in Marathi in the Modi script, though some of the informants must have spoken various dialects of Chhattisgarhi Hindi – occasionally, the actual words are recorded, as for example, in the invocation of Dulhadev by the Sonkars '*Jay Deva! Ham tum acchya rakh . . .*'[20]

We almost always learn the identity of the informant, and the place where Vinayakrao interviewed him. For example, in April 1823, he went to Pandheria, and asked 'a knowledgeable man', the manager of that zamindari,

> what is the oldest place in this region? He said Bedarmadev was, so I went there, and talked with Kodu Diwan by caste Durga Gond of the Sahadeva sept, and in the village of Darmo, also to four or five elderly men and to Jagannath Purohit

[20] OIOC Mss Mar. D. 46 fo. 48b.'Hail, O God! Safeguard us . . .'.

of Sakalni, and Jivram Pande-Mankuban resident of Kawarda, knowledgeable persons . . .[21]

Occasionally Vinayakrao adds his own observations or comments, but this is usually clearly indicated in the text.

Of course, the narratives and information presented are not innocent representations of a commonly accepted reality – travelling in the train of the all-powerful Resident Jenkins Saheb Bahadur, Vinayakrao would have been a man to fear and to conciliate. Even the unlettered Gond met in a remote village knew that he had to guard his tongue when before the Pandit; asked about his attitude to theft, he answered artlessly 'We have been born in order to rob,' but quickly added 'but we do not do it nowadays'.[22] On the other hand, the servant of the new Kupni Sarkar which had restored at least some zamindars their ancestral holdings would also be a man to impress with ones' status and grievances, in the hope of raising the one and righting the other.

The depositions recorded are those of a large number of individuals belonging to various ethnic groups (including even a Sikh who had somehow arrived in this remote backwater), but we shall concentrate on our main theme, and consider the evidence relating to the identifiable forest peoples, such as Kavar and Markam Gond who had an uncertain presence on the fringes of the plains as petty chiefs, cultivators, or watchmen-cum-robbers. Vinayakrao talked with one of their leading men near the little zamindari town of Pendhra, who began by listing the number of houses of his *jati* in the area: they totalled 940, and continued

> some of our *jati* cultivate, and some are in employment; others live by daily labour. But in our caste the seclusion of women [*pardah*] is very strict. The wives of great men of our caste do not set foot outside their homes; wives of poor men work only at home. If they have to go to another village, then they do not go unless accompanied by either their husbands, brothers, fathers-in-law or sons. There are many Kavars – but the pure Kavars [*dudh kavar*] are few – five or ten houses here and there. The Kavars of four other sorts are worthless, may be called children of female slaves. They may also be found in Korba, Aring, and Dhakamb. We do not even drink water from their hands. We do not eat from the hands of the Ritiya, Chati, Paikra – these five [*sic*] castes.

This statement reflects the zamindar's desire to distance himself and his immediate kin from the rest of the tribe, and to assert upper-caste standards of conduct. Ethnic ties that were impossible to deny could be attenuated by the device of declaring the connection to be via illegitimate birth. The next step in this strategy was to deny local origin in this jungle tract, and to claim that the ancestors had come from the ritually superior lands of the north. So Ajit Singh then provided a genealogy

[21] Ibid., fo. 247b. [22] Ibid., fo. 39b.

going back eighteen generations to Indu and Sindhu, two brothers who came from Delhi. They came and founded a settlement of sixty houses and ruled over it. However, they sheltered a kinsman who had committed an offence against the local Raja, and their house was surrounded and plundered, and they were only saved by a Gond who was killed fighting while they escaped. 'His name was Gata Pidha, and he has been made into the deity of this place and our village named after him ... having been stripped and plundered my ancestor went into the forest and lived by hunting and by cutting wood and bamboos in the forest and bringing them for sale.'

Then he found 500 rupees lost by a merchant on the way to Jagannath and went to Ratanpur and gave it to the Raja. The latter was pleased with his honesty and appointed him zamindar of Pendhra and told him to guard the roads and passes and to settle the country and levy customary dues on the merchants, and to come and serve with his following of Kawars in times of need. His ancestor then found an auspicious place, settled there, and cut down the jungle and established villages for a circuit of forty miles around it. After that he and his descendants after him performed many great feats of arms. The main thrust of the narrative is evidently to provide a 'civilised and civilising' origin for the estate and also to emphasise the warrior qualities of its holders. After several pages devoted to the martial exploits of Ajit Singh's ancestors, he decided to move on to other evidence of his high standing, such as the precedence granted his family at the most famous pilgrimage centre in the eastern mountains, the shrine of Amarkantak: 'If the Vaghel chief [of Rewa] and the ruler of Mandla and I, go together to the temple, then I have the first sight of the goddess Narmada.' He was prudent enough to end with a paean of praise for the present regime: 'Now I am happy, now I am content; I bless the justice of the English.'[23]

That this was a concerted attempt at status-raising is evidenced by the statements of the zamindars of Kenda, Matin and Uproda as well. These all claimed to be branches of the line of Indu and Sindhu, the house of Uproda being descended from Sindhu, but while at Pendhra eighteen generations had elapsed since that time, Shivsingh at Uproda was of the eleventh generation![24]

Other Kavar zamindars embroidered on the same themes as Ajitsingh. At Kafa Vikramsingh had a *gotra* to offer: the Gangakachi; his ancestor had come from the north too, but from Kajtitha (evidently Kanauj *tirtha*), and met the Haihayavanshi king, and said 'there are too many

[23] This narrative is to be found in ibid., fos. 125b to 129a.
[24] Ibid., fos. 148a–150b.

trees at this place Kafa; I will cut down the trees and settle the place'. He was finally granted the sub-division, and had to serve with fifteen musketeers and fifteen other soldiers. The stories elsewhere were very similar; the chief of Chapa (who evidently was acquainted with the Mahabharata) introduced a new twist to the northern origin by saying 'Our ancestors? Near Hastnapura there is the place called Kavran; we are of the Kavar line, children of the Kavras. Nilkanth Diwan came from there. There was a lot of jungle in Chapa; he cut down the jungle and made a settlement.'[25] The Kavar zamindars seem certainly to have made a favourable impression on Vinayakrao – summing them up he duly recorded 'among them *purdah* is very strict, they are Hindu Kshetri, their ethic is devotion to Brahmans, prayers and worship ...'[26] The status of pure Hindu warrior was visible also among the Markam division of Gond, who also held a number of small zamindaris. Their spokesman was Maharajshah of Navagad. Their origin myth involved divine intervention: a man had gone to collect roots on Amarkantak mountain and died there. Shiva and Parvati were passing and Parvati besought her husband to bring the corpse to life; this was duly achieved, and the man was now dubbed 'Markam' (Die + less), and Shiva gave him the boon that he would rule over the plains below. So he came down and settled at Navagad, clearing away the jungle and making a settlement. After that the Haihayavanshi rulers arrived, and the Markams became their feudatories, and performed the usual great feats of arms.[27] It is evident that the lure of warrior status was as powerful for these remote hill chiefs on the borders of Orissa as it had been for the Bhils or Kolis of the western mountains.

Vinayakrao in fact listed as Kshatriya the following: Rajput, Haihayavanshi, Surajvansi, Gangabansi, Nagbansi, Somvansi, Chavan, Lodhi and Kayet.[28] He was a broad-minded man, since at Pune the orthodoxy was certainly that no genuine Kshatriyas had survived Parashurama, and his list is testimony of the fact that social transformation was relatively easy on this unsettled frontier.

The rise of the Gonds to regal power had also led to efforts to assimilate their gods on the part of the local Brahmans. Vinayakrao met several who were learned in the Shastra, and asked them about the gods of the Gonds. He was told that there were seventeen, but the main gods were five, all of whom could be assimilated to Mahadeva (Shiva); so for example, Dulha deva was Mahadeva because he came to the mountains where the Gonds lived as a bridegroom in order to marry Parvati, the mountain-born goddess. The sacred books say, the Brahmans con-

[25] Ibid., fos. 150b—151a.
[26] Ibid., fo. 154b.
[27] Ibid., fos. 157b—158a.
[28] Ibid., fo. 174b.

tinued, that Mahadeva is the lord of the Asuras (demons), and these mountain folk may be termed Asuras. A sixth deity was determined to be the Narmada, and the remaining eleven were demoted: 'they are not gods, they are just the names of their ancestors'.[29]

But such accommodation required some appeasement of the Brahmans by the aspirants to Kshatriya status. So when Bhairav Singh, zamindar of Kauda and Ajit Singh of Pendhra answered a detailed set of questions as to the customs of their people, the striving to conform to the appropriate model is visible in all their answers, though an occasional anxiety about neglecting powerful ancestral custom also breaks through. So, when asked about their gods, they immediately declared Bhavani Durga to be their family deity, and other gods to be Mahadeva, and Bhagavan Narayan Vishnu. But they could not omit the stone deity Jhagdakhand, who was offered the sacrifice of a goat at Dasahra. They were also devotees of the Ramanandi and Jimanandi (*sic*) orders of ascetics – excluding therefore the Kabirpanthis, associated with the lower castes. Brahmans and Brahmanical rites were prominent in the description of marriage customs, though even here, the wood for the marriage platform had to come from the forest, and be worshipped by the women outside the village before it came in. However the Brahmans had to be Kanojia Brahmans, foreigners, not local Brahmans of the jungle lands. The rites of passage were, or were depicted, as being equally orthodox, with funerary ceremonies ending, if possible, at Gaya. Corpses were always cremated, and widows sometimes burned themselves – another marker of status. The remarriage of widows was not permitted; and the younger brother viewed his elder brother's wife as equivalent to his mother. Sexual irregularities by women were intolerable – they were put out of caste and never accepted again; in the case of men, they were accepted after they gave a feast to their caste-fellows.[30]

Other claimants to the title of Dudhkavar were less eager to abandon their tribal gods. Sadiv Karva, resident of the village of Bharidanda in the sub-division Pendhra, still had Dulhadev and Mirkuvar as his main deities, and offered them blood-sacrifices twice a year. The Kavars (he said) came from Banda (a northern district) – their marriage customs were just the same as those of Brahmans (he did not elaborate), and Brahmans gave them the sacred thread at the time of marriage. Wives were inferior to husbands; they were regarded like servants (*chakrapramane*); second marriages of women were known, and the younger brother might marry the elder brother's widow. 'The remarriage of women is the custom of our caste; therefore there is no shame in it.'

[29] Ibid., fo. 177a. [30] Ibid., fos. 227b–231a.

Outcasting resulted if they ate at the hands of another caste, if they had a bad skin disease, if they killed a cow, and if women misconducted themselves sexually – purification simply required a feast to the caste. Sadiv was probably a more accurate informant than the aspirant Rajas whose evidence we have previously considered: when asked what his people would do if a fugitive came to them for shelter, he responded: 'What fugitive is going to take shelter with us small farmers? Nor are there any big zamindars in our country.'[31]

The Markam Gond Maharajshah of Navagad sought to project a more strongly martial identity who still worshipped Budhadeva (the Elder God). He stated that his community also bathed each morning and worshipped Ganapati before eating. As with other aspirants to warrior status, the sexual purity of women was vigorously emphasised. Girls were always married by the age of twelve or fourteen, and the expense was borne by the girl's father unless he was very poor. Brahmans figured in the ceremony. Only pure animals were eaten: goats, fish and deer – no others. They did not drink liquor. Women observed *purdah*. There were no second marriages of women, and the elder brother's wife was viewed like the mother. The elders were much respected: juniors would not speak too much before them, and would not smoke in their presence. Corpses were cremated, and some widows burned themselves. Asked about attitudes to robbery Maharajshah piously replied 'we do not consider it a good thing'. When asked how thievery and sexual misconduct was dealt with Maharajshah took on his warrior role, and announced 'We kill them [the culprits] or drive them from the village' but then, recollecting his audience, hastily corrected himself 'nowadays we only banish them'. Asked what they did if anyone came to them for refuge, Maharajshah answered 'we do not hand him over; by whatever means needed we make terms for him.' Once well-launched on his Sanskritising fantasies, the allegiance to Budhadeva described in the first answer was forgotten, and in response to the twenty-third question Ramachandra was described as the favourite god.[32]

The 1870 *Gazetteer* declared that the Kavars might well be of Aryan stock, and cited the Raipur Settlement officer to the effect that they were 'imperfect Rajputs who settled early among the hills of the Vindhyan ranges, and failed in becoming Hinduised, like other warlike immigrants'.[33] Endorsement by the ruling power – essential to a warrior identity – was thus well on the way to being secured.

[31] Ibid., fos. 231b–234b. [32] Ibid., 234b – 237a.
[33] Grant (ed.), *C. P. Gazetteer*, p. cxxi.

From kings of the forest to lords of the land

The identity of the warrior was clearly one to which subordinate communities of our entire region, both cultivators and woodsmen, frequently aspired. The loss of such status was perhaps the most widespread motif in the origin myths of South Asia. However, down to the nineteenth century, their way of life allowed dominant forest communities to approximate to their ideal far more closely than working farmers in the champaign country could do. To begin with, they generallly paid no taxes or tributes – and such payments always betokened subordination. Furthermore they bore arms – always a mark of honour; D. C. Graham commented in 1844 that among the Khandesh Bhils 'no employment was considered to be correct which in any way interfered with the cherished burden of the long-bow, and the ponderous sheaf of arrows.'[34] We may recollect that the *nayakvadis* of earlier centuries had identified themselves by the mark of the dagger or bow and arrow on official documents.

Equally, hunting was the sport of kings – and hunters were therefore in some measure kingly: the 'love of sport' which the British officials (approvingly) noted in many forest peoples may, apart from the mundane needs of the stomach, have reinforced the warrior self-perception.[35] Officialdom also commented on other traits – such as indolence and improvidence, but did not make the connection with the life-styles of the Rajput and cognate gentry all over the sub-continent, even though exactly the same judgements were being made about their behaviour by other (or indeed the same) officials at the same time. Even before special laws and regulations were put in place for the forest folk, similar shelters had to be prepared to protect their gentry cousins from the harsh effects of law and economics (see the opening section of chapter 8). Even the fondness for intoxication, so often condemned as the besetting vice of the forest peoples, was equally characteristic of the landed gentry generally, though opium rather than alcohol was the drug of choice in those elevated circles. Intoxicants were an old adjunct to the military life-style. Fryer wrote in the 1670s: '[o]pium is frequently eaten in great quantities by the *Rashpoots*, *Queteries* and *Patans* when they fight . . .'[36] In the 1820s, James Tod proposed a north European origin for the Rajputs on the basis of their disregard of Brahmans and fondness for

[34] Graham, 'Bheel Tribes', *SRBG*, 26, p. 206.
[35] Even in the 1970s, one of the traits associated with 'Rajput valour and honour' was a 'craze for hunting'. K. N. Thusu, *Gond Kingdom of Chanda* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1982), p. 269.
[36] J. Fryer, *A New Account of East Indies*, II, p. 106.

alcohol.[37] The same traits were described by the 1879 *Gazetteer* of Rajputana, which said of the Rajputs that they 'are very superstitious, but caste rules sit lightly on them, and they can use a Brahmin very unceremoniously; they are eaters of flesh, preferring goats to sheep, and wild pig to everything; they drink very strong spirits and are great consumers of opium.'[38]

A contempt for productive labour was another trait shared with forest folk: and it could be said of landlords and forest lords alike 'although they condescend to receive food from the hands of those who have degraded themselves by honest labour, yet they will not intermarry with those who have thus sunk in their estimation'.[39] The savage noble was much like the noble savage.

In one respect however, the two differed; this was the degree of control over women and the regulation of sexuality generally. This is an enormous and little explored subject, but it may be suggested that the relative freedom of tribal women was a consequence of the more open, unstable and small-scale political systems of the forested lands, which made elaborate strategies of kinship alliance and prestation of women, such as characterised the neighbouring kingdoms, either irrelevant or impossible. Furthermore, great and noble warriors though they might aspire to be, most ordinary tribesmen still depended on the domestic and agricultural labour of their wives and daughters to eke out a living. Even in wartime, women played a vital logistical role; Graham noted how they conveyed provisions from the plains to the fastnesses, and their capture usually resulted in the capitulation of the insurgents.[40] Such roles obviously called for qualities of hardihood and enterprise unlikely to be generated in the harem. So child marriage and purdah were feasible only if political power created the economic basis for such practices. Lineages that had acquired the necessary wealth and also aspired to extensive political alliances, might however, begin to adopt such strategies – as among the Kavar zamindars discussed earlier in this chapter. This would however involve breaking ties with one ethnic community, and crossing the boundary into another – always a costly and risky process, as the rulers of Ramnagar, for example, may have found. None the less, it was a recognised aspect of state-building. Hislop's version of the Gond legend of Lingo was taken from a bard in Nagpur. The bard would almost certainly have been a dependant of one

[37] J. Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajast'han*, 2 vols. (1829; repr. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), I, pp. 57–60.
[38] Anon., *The Rajputana Gazetteer* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1879), p. 68.
[39] Graham, 'Bheel Tribes', in *SRBG*, 26, p. 206.
[40] Ibid., p. 207.

the Rajgond lineages there, and it is significant that, apart from introducing agriculture and urbanisation, Lingo is shown as introducing rules of marriage.[41] The bards recognised that agricultural clearance, commerce and a reorganisation of kinship and alliance systems would be central elements in the transition from chiefhood to kingship. Few of the many who attempted the transition ever completed it – but of the lineages that did so, a good proportion would have spent a crucial part of their careers among the savage nobles at the margins of the sown.

Conclusions

This chapter attempted to focus on the ideals and behaviour of forest folk and suggested that they partook predominantly of one of the mainstream cultures of medieval South Asia – that of the soldier rather than that of the cleric, merchant or peasant. That this culture was gradually marginalised by the predominance of the norms and manners of the literati under colonial rule should not blind us to its former importance. Groups who had invested their social capital in this line inevitably suffered by the change. At the top of the hierarchy some successfully made the change from warlord to landlord; towards the bottom a more numerous class completed the transition from peasant-militia to dominant caste. Many of the latter were, like the Sahyadri Kolis, already located on the agricultural frontier at the commencement of colonial rule. Yet others trickled in to join the agricultural proletariat. But those who remained committed to the mobile and independent life-style – now forager, now cultivator, now warrior – found the agricultural frontier closing around them, and were left to the tender mercies of the Forest Department that came into being from mid century. Their fate in two small pockets has been sketched in the last two sections of chapter 6. The larger story will occupy the next two chapters.

[41] 'All you Gonds understand nothing. You do not know whom to call brother and whom father ... from whom to ask a daughter and to whom to give your daughter.' Hislop, *Papers*, p. 45. The efforts of the Rajgond chiefs to marry into Gazetteered Rajput families is described by Forsyth, *Highlands of Central India*, pp. 135–8.

8 The high colonial period and after: new patterns of authority and power

Introduction

This chapter looks primarily at the policies of social and environmental engineering undertaken by the colonial regime from the middle decades of the nineteenth century, their interaction with the outlooks and ambitions of the forest peoples, and their more immediate social consequences.

Conservation and conservatism – from imperial to independent India

John Malcolm (fl. 1798–1830), an important shaper of policy in western India, favoured the maintenance of what he saw as appropriate hierarchies in Indian society. In a minute written while Governor of Bombay, he emphasised the need to sustain hierarchies in Bhil society as much as in other parts of India, even while the policies of his administration inevitably undermined them.[1] Following the suppression of the great uprising of 1857–58, the colonial government was more aware of the extent of its power but had developed an acute sense of the danger of upsetting established hierarchies, as represented by the princely states, landlords and the proprietor (*malik*) stratum of peasants, in Indian society. On the other hand, the successful extirpation of the risings in the Central Indian jungles seemed evidence that the forest peoples were no longer a formidable menace. If therefore, the first viceroys began with a determination to uphold the perceived status quo in the agrarian order, they also embarked more confidently on reconstructing a supposed ecological status quo in the wild lands that abutted the sown.

The beginnings of colonial conservation have been traced in the pioneering work of Richard Grove and Mahesh Rangarajan and it is

[1] John Malcolm, 'Minute', in OIOC, BJP 20 Feb.1828 P/400/15 no. 6.

therefore unnecessary to rehearse them here.[2] The Bombay Presidency figures prominently in the narrative, and Grove shows how the environmental concerns of officialdom in Britain and India as well as anxieties about timber supply combined in 1847 in the creation of 'an establishment for the management of the forests under the Bombay Presidency *at a monthly charge of 295 Rupees*'.[3] The forests were clearly a rather low priority – far larger sums were routinely spent for other purposes; hence the Conservatorship stood a better chance of survival and expansion if it could generate revenues in excess of its expenditures. The Conservators were clearly aware of this: the exhibition of financial success was a constant theme running through their *Reports*, and controls were often recommended more for their effects on the bottom line than on the tree line. Gibson, the first Conservator in Bombay, suggested for example, that in Khandesh the best system of management would be 'for Government to have a certain fixed duty on wood brought for sale in the Bazaar – leaving to the Bheels and others their usual Dustooree [commission] on the village wood when the same is purchased or cut on the spot by others'.[4] This would obviously produce an easy revenue, but have little effect on the actual management of the forests, and hence on their conservation. Forest Department profits peaked in 1859–60 and began to decline thereafter, falling from Rs.367,000 in that year to 79,000 in 1864–5.[5] This led to the formation of a committee that recommended the abolition of Timber Agencies and Depots as their expenditures exceeded their receipts; and this was duly done.[6] The forest bureaucracy then sought to rebuild its empire by instituting departmental extraction of timber instead of relying on contractors as it had hitherto done.[7] Ecological arguments now gained a new prominence: the *Report* for 1862–3 warned darkly that 'financial results form the worst criterion of success in this Department, as Government are well aware that the largest balance on the credit side of the account is quite compatible with an unwise and lavish expenditure of forest produce'.

Financial ill-succcess continued to dog the Department, and the Conservator Dalzell, spent many pages explaining it – complaining in 1864–65, for example, that private supplies were flooding the market,

[2] R. H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism 1600–1860* (Indian edn: Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), especially ch. 8; M. Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces 1860–1914* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 51–60.

[3] Cited in ibid. p. 436; emphasis added.

[4] A. Gibson to Collr. Khandesh (n.d.), in BARD, vol. 96 of 1850 p. 72.

[5] Report for 1864–5 in *Forest Reports of the Bombay Presidency for the years 1860–61 to 1867–68*, p. 122.

[6] *Annual Report on the Administration of the Bombay Presidency 1861–2*, p. 107.

[7] *Annual Admin. Rept. Bombay 1862–3*, p. 185.

and so government timber could not be sold. Two years later, several pages of his *Report* were again spent in explaining why the Department was losing money in every district except North Canara; it was due to the failure to restrict private sales of wood.[8] It was therefore during this period that he composed the *Observations* (1863), which, among other things, recommended that every patch of woodland, no matter how small, should be taken over by the Conservator's department,[9] which would no doubt have done well out of such a monopoly. Thus the celebrated and alarmist *Observations* was the product of a time of financial difficulty – evidently the environmental tub was the more vigorously thumped because the treasury chest rang hollow.

The Department's expansive ambitions encountered sharp resistance from (among others) those elements in rural society that understood the new techniques of petitions and protests – as it happened, chiefly landlords from the coastal districts near Bombay, who helped create the Thana Forest Sabha in the 1880s, and succeeded in getting a Commission of Enquiry appointed in 1885. The ancient ferocity of forest peoples was invoked as a reason why conservancy should not be implemented: in a petition to the Commission, the inhabitants of Kolaba warned that if the principal means of livelihood of the 'wild people', cutting and selling wood, was stopped they might resort to 'plundering the peaceful and armless, and therefore helpless inhabitants of the villages'.[10]

But a more sustained opposition came from the Revenue Department, which engaged in a bitter turf war with the parvenu foresters, who, after all, did not belong to the ranks of the heaven-born Civil Service, and were headed by continentals to boot. In the late nineteenth century, therefore, the Revenue Department officials took it upon themselves to champion the cause of peasants and tribals and expose the misdeeds of the Forest Department. A participant in this intramural struggle looked back on it with lofty amusement in 1911, when reviewing papers connected it with the abrogation of some Bhil 'privileges': 'The old codes were necessary in the middle eighties when there was bitter war between the Rev. and For. officers, it is wonderful that they have lasted nearly a quarter of a century.'[11]

The threat of tribal uprisings was frequently invoked during this departmental turf war – so, for example, the Collector of Khandesh

[8] *Forest Reports of the Bombay Presidency 1860–61 to 1867–68*, pp. 122–3, 179–81.
[9] *SRBG*, 76 (N.S.), N. A. Dalzell, *Observations on the Influence of Forests*, pp. 20–2.
[10] *Report of the Bombay Forest Commission*, IV, p. 84.
[11] BARD, vol. 117 of 1911, p. 183 'Minute' by RAL (R. A. Lamb, Chief Secretary?), on papers relating to G. R. 4409 of 5 May 1911.

warned that the imposition of restrictions on Bhil wood-cutting would 'lead to widespread disturbances among the Bhils and other wild tribes ...'[12] This was perhaps a response to Conservator Shuttleworth's ponderously sarcastic query as to 'why the Bhils who are an eminently lazy race, should be considered a special class of mundane being, and should be pampered and exceptionally favoured'.[13] Furthermore, in most of the area under the control of the Forest Department it began a campaign to either turn the forest-dwellers into a servile labour force, or drive them out altogether. Its ambitions were caustically summarised by J. Pollen of the Civil Service, Forest Settlement Officer in 1882

> I gather from your memorandum that ... the Conservator N. D. proposes
> (1) To use the whole countryside as 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' for the Forest Department.
> (2) To charge them (Bhils and all alike) very handsome fees for the services so rendered ...
> ... the proposals are quite characteristic of Shuttleworth, and are in perfect accord with his way of doing business.[14]

The feud was gradually resolved, and once interdepartmental peace was established, forest villages were left in the sole charge of that department which rapidly whittled away whatever it had been compelled to grant in 1882. So by 1920 the Working Plan for the Satpuda forests could declare that the rights had

> from the very beginning *existed only on paper*, and have seldom if ever been exercised independently of the privileges ... They may, therefore, be disregarded ... At the present time, with the exception of a few families in Chopda, who claim a right to cut bamboo on fees ... the very existence of any rights is unknown to the people ...[15]

And so the kings of the forest and their subjects alike became the largely quiescent serfs of the Forest Department. Looking back on this period, an anonymous Forest official remarked regretfully in the 1980s '[w]e used to be kings (of the forests), now we have to go as beggars (to persuade people to plant trees)'.[16] The Department developed its own version of history in order to justify the way that it functioned: this was that the forests had been quite empty until the early twentieth century, when timber operations caused the setting up of labour camps, whose occupants were allowed to cultivate a little land when not otherwise

[12] BARD, vol. 329 of 1886, p. 202, J. D. Mackenzie, Collr. Khandesh to Commnr. 20 March 1886.
[13] BARD, vol. 107 of 1886 p. 33, A. T. Shuttleworth to Commnr. C.D. 14 December 1885.
[14] BARD, vol. 87 of 1883, pp. 41–2, J. Pollen, F.S.O., 9 June 1882.
[15] *Working Plan for the Satpuda Forests*, pp. 6–7; emphasis added.
[16] Cited in Centre for Science and Environment, *The State of India's Environment 1984–85* (New Delhi: The Centre, 1985), p. 59.

employed. These camps then grew into forest villages.[17] The object of this origin myth was evidently to claim that the villagers existed solely by the grace and favour of the government, and could make no claims against it.

So the forest was no longer a strategic resource for its inhabitants: and they were losing it even as an economic resource. Under colonial auspices the agrarian order finally triumphed over its *jangli* antagonist. The colonial (and post-colonial) period was unique not in that forests were cleared, or that forest peoples politically subjugated – both are old processes in Indian history – but that the changes now had a sweeping and irreversible character that they had never previously possessed. The diverse communities of the woodlands faced the unprecedented choice of either maintaining a presence in that dwindling habitat at the beck and call of the Forest Department, or attempting to transform themselves into a settled peasantry. The object of the British was, at least in theory, to propel all the forest peoples along the latter path. The fate of those who trod it forms the theme of the third section of the present chapter, which is preceded by a consideration of the socio-political effects of the new regime of the forests on those who remained in the shrinking woodlands.

Finally, I must emphasise that the separate analysis of forest and agricultural tracts is an expository device, and the two did not form geographically distinct domains. Lands under the control of the Forest Department were intricately interwoven with the fields and pastures of settled peasants, and forests themselves were honeycombed with fields and clearings, recorded and unrecorded. People also moved in and out of these domains, and the first response to stress or danger was often migration from the one to the other. None the less, as density in the agrarian sector increased on the one hand, and the regime of the forests became more rigorous on the other, formerly flexible peoples were forced into more rigid lifeways, and we shall devote this chapter to an understanding of that process.

[17] This fiction is part of what we may term the oral, or (given the manifest attainments of its bearers), semi-literate tradition of the Department. It occasionally surfaces in print, as for example, in the opening sentence of a circular to all State Conservators issued by the Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1990 – 'Forest villages were set up in remote and inaccessible forest areas with a view to provide uninterrupted man-power (sic), for forestry operation.' R. R. Prasad and M. P. Jahagirdar, *Tribal Situation in Forest Villages: Changing Subsistence Strategies and Adaptation* (Delhi: Discovery Books, 1993), Annexure 14, p. 223; see also pp. 16, 63.

The new kings of the forest

Regions such as the Dangs, as we noted earlier, were exceptional; over most of the great forest belt, new structures of authority, legal and paralegal, were taking shape, with forest, excise and police employees and their associated contractors prominent in them; these were the new kings of the forest. But the Department's initial zeal for control resulted in the emigration of many of the forest villagers, with consequent labour shortages for the Department and the businessmen and moneylenders who played a major part in its operations. That danger had been foreseen by Richard Temple in the Central Provinces as early as 1863. Objecting to any total ban on swidden cultivation, he wrote:

> if [the swiddeners] were not in the country, the last state of the forests would be worse than the first. For then the traces of human habitation, settlement and clearance would disappear. The foresters and the woodsmen could no longer live in, or even enter into into, the wilderness, rank and malarious with uncleared jungle, and overrun with wild beasts.[18]

In addition, of course, the labour and supplies needed by forest officials had also to be drawn from such populations. This was sought to be ensured by the formation of special 'forest villages' whose inhabitants lived as virtual serfs of the Department, which had an exclusive claim to their labour. The process has been carefully studied in the Central Provinces by Archana Prasad, and she documents how, by 1890, it had been decided that these villages

> were to be designed solely for the permanent supply of labour [and] . . . made up of those communities that were 'habituated to the extraction of forest produce'. . . The D. F. O. was solely responsible for the administration of these tracts. Each household was to be allowed a patch for cultivation at fixed rates per plough; free grazing was to be allowed for a limited number of cattle. Thus the forest department had arbitrary control over these villages. They regulated the forest community's relationship with contractors (if the forest was leased) and determined what kind of 'subsistence relations' would be developed among forest dwellers.[19]

The same pattern developed elsewhere. An officer from Khandesh commented before the Forest Commission of 1885–6: 'The wild tribes are, as a rule, unwilling to work for labour, and I am afraid that in most cases any labour they have done for the Forest Department has really been forced labour.'[20] Similarly, in the Dangs, Ajay Skaria notes that

[18] Cited by Temple in his preface to Hislop, *Papers*, p. vi.
[19] Archana Prasad, 'Forests and Subsistence in Colonial India: A Study of the Central Provinces 1830–1945', Unpublished PhD thesis Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, 1994, p. 238.
[20] *Forest Commission Rept*, II, p. 55.

administrative control was tightened up after 1902, and official complaints of labour shortages ceased: it was extracted as *begar* (compulsory service).[21] This situation persisted down to the end of colonial rule: in 1940 Wylie, Governor of the Central Provinces, summed up the situation:

> We are dealing with people whom their admirers describe as the ancient lords of the jungle but whom I personally prefer to consider as forest labourers isolated from the normal working of the law of demand and supply, and as such at the mercy of the Forest Department, who are the sole purveyors of the labour, from which, if the inhabitants of the forest villages are to stay there at all, they have got to make a livelihood.[22]

The 'petty exactions and haughtiness' that Rigby had denounced among the Rajas' *sibandis* (see above, pp. 139–40) were now the prerogative of a new class of mercenaries – so, for example, Rama Pandu of Thana district testified before a Commission of Enquiry in 1886 as follows: 'If the [forest] guard meets us he ill-treats us. He makes us give him fowls for nothing, when we cut wood for our houses.' Another cultivator testified to a more developed system of extortion where each 'hamlet pays annually bribe of 2 rupees to the forest peon for allowing villagers facilities for cutting wood for building etc. We have been paying this money for many years.'[23] Forty years later, the situation was much the same; the non-official members of the Forest Grievances Enquiry Committee in Bombay Presidency reported that '[a]lmost everywhere the villagers directly or indirectly conveyed to the Committee that the lower subordinates in the Department practiced zooloom [oppression] in manifold ways.'[24] Even the foreign mercenaries (Pathan and 'Bhaiya') were back, employed now not by Rajas, but by contractors. Symington, reporting on West Khandesh in 1938 wrote of their methods of enforcement – the 'Pathan does not hesitate to use physical force when performing his duties. Instances of assault, beatings and hurt are of such constant occurrence that they do not arouse much comment locally, unless unusual brutality has occurred.'[25]

As Symington recognised, there could be no resistance in the new political and economic environment 'since one and all are dependent on

[21] Ajay Skaria, 'A Forest Polity', pp. 260–1.
[22] Cited in Prasad, 'Forests and Subsistence', p. 242.
[23] *Report of the Bombay Forest Commission*, II, pp. 20, 25.
[24] *Report of the Forest Grievances Enquiry Committee* (Bombay: Government Press, 1926), p. 23.
[25] Symington *Report on the Condition of Aboriginal and Hill Tribes*, p. 12. In part, this acquiescence may also have reflected the way that the Bhils themselves dealt with their subordinates when they had the power to do so: Bhil rajas often employed bonded ploughmen, and one of them was recorded to have killed his ploughman. See Skaria, 'A Forest Polity', p. 184 and note.

the sowcars, they cannot afford to antagonise them'.[26] Local officials colluded with the local moneyed men in sustaining this dependence – for example by not issuing passes for the Bhils to sell their mahua fruit with the obvious result that they had to sell to contractors 'at a great loss to themselves.'[27] Indeed, the omnipotent image of the *sahukar* among the Bhils at the beginning of the twentieth century is illustrated by an anecdote in the memoirs of a German missionary posted at Nawapur in West Khandesh. He showed a group of boys at Sunday school a picture of Jesus Christ – no doubt suitably depicted as Caucasian, haloed and glorious – being received into Heaven, and asked them who it represented; there was silence, and then one of them said 'Chokari' – the *sahukar*.[28]

As an ICS man, Symington took a generally mild view of the activities of government employees: the worst that could be laid at the door of the regime that he served, he claimed, was benign neglect. He apparently never learned that 'a forest subordinate is a terror to the Bhils.'[29] The close social and political links between its personnel and the landlords and *sahukars* whom he castigates, as well as their joint oppression of the tribal peoples, seem to have escaped him, even though it was highlighted by his hero Elwin, who wrote

> I cannot think of anything more shameful, anything meaner, anything more disgraceful to an administration that claims to be enlightened than the way subordinates openly rob these poor people, some of the poorest in the world, of the few goods they have and of many hours of labour. *Begar* [forced labour] is the curse of tribal India.[30]

Its existence was acknowledged, and justified, by Edie, Conservator of Forests, Bombay Province in 1927:

> It is the custom in some Districts for the people to do a certain amount of labour free in return for the privileges enjoyed, and if this custom is not abused by subordinates exacting an inordinate amount of labour there is, as a rule, no complaint.[31]

The social relations between the local landlords and contractors and officialdom was witnessed in the Thana district by Godavari Parulekar who wrote that two 'instruments were employed by the landlords and sahukars in subjecting thousands of Varlis and reducing them to slavery:

[26] Symington, *Report*, p. 13.
[27] *Report of the Forest Grievances Enquiry Committee*, pt.II–C 'Notes by the Non-official Members', p. 47.
[28] Dahlgren, *Our Bheel Mission in India*, p. 47.
[29] *Report of the Forest Grievances Enquiry Committee*, pt.II-C p. 47.
[30] Elwin, *The Baiga*, p. 517.
[31] BARD File 7324/24, pt.2, A. G. Edie, conservator of Forests to G. B. Pradhan, Minister for Excise and Forests, 10 March 1927, para.vi.

one was the government bureaucracy, and the other private supervisors, stewards etc.' She also noted how touring officials, with the exception of some very senior ones, invariably lodged with the landlords and contractors, and were sumptuously entertained. It was only after the Kisan Sabha agitation that officials were to be seen living in Government rest houses or tents.[32]

In the previous chapter we considered how the entry of this new ruling elite necessitated the truncation of the political system through the marginalisation of the older chiefs and rulers. The results of this process have also affected official and scholarly perception of the residual forest communities. Since police and forest officials, contractors etc. were evidently recent intruders, their presence was viewed as having no bearing on the socio-political structures of the tribal communities, when, in fact, they represented the apex of the new social order. Concentrating solely on the truncated remnant of the old hierarchy, observers overlooked the living apex of the new one, easily succumbed to the notion of the simple, primitive and egalitarian forest tribe, and hence failed to see the simplified, primitivised, silvicultural proletariat that it was being hammered into becoming.[33]

Agrarianisation, sedentarisation and bondage

All the changes discussed above were not necessarily consciously sought by officialdom: but agrarianisation was an overriding priority. In that scenario, the legitimate role of the protected upper classes was to cooperate in the task of agricultural settlement, and transform themselves into landlords, and their dependants into peasants. In the vocabulary of the nineteenth century, this was synonymous with civilisation. The object, as a Bombay Revenue Letter of 1823 put it, was 'to reclaim ... the Coolies, Bheels, Kattouries, Thakoors and other uncivilised tribes who inhabit the jungles, from the wretched state of degradation to the habits of industry, by encouraging them to become cultivators of the soil ...'[34]

But this was not how it was seen from below: the claims enunciated at the outset of British rule were to an honourable livelihood befitting warriors, and completely rejecting the idea of anything so ignoble as productive labour. If the government wanted peace, appropriate provi-

[32] Godavari Parulekar, *Jevha Manusa Jaga Hoto*, 3rd edn (Mauj Prakashan: Mumbai 1978), pp. 46–7.

[33] A notable exception to this statement is the work of Susana C. B. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992), p. 76.

[34] Extract Revenue Letter from Bombay, 19 April 1822 in *Selection of Papers ... East India House*, III, pp. 765–6.

sion would have to be made for chiefs and followers. Thus Chil Naik of Khandesh wrote to Lieutenant Hodges in the 1820s: '[d]o as you please, but to give us nothing to eat and leave us to feed on leaves and grass is an admirable plan. We are Sirdars [chiefs] – What occasion is there to for us to write more.'[35] This statement is also evidence against the widespread present-day view that conflicts between central authority and the 'adivasi' community turned solely on control over natural resources ('leaves and grass'); the Naik clearly wanted social products – money and honour. When, therefore, a body of Tadvi Bhils under their own chiefs were taken into British employ, they decided to complete their transition to an aristocratic life-style, and 'were constantly in a state of intoxication, never capable of any exertion . . .'[36] It is likely that in their view the posts were a reward for their past exertions as marauders, and should certainly not involve additional toil; the corps was soon disbanded.

Even where such spirited (and spirituous) aspirations to elite status had been crushed centuries earlier, as among the Gonds in the Gawilgarh hills between Khandesh and Berar, Bradley observed in 1845, of the local Gonds that '[n]o matter how hard gripped they may be by want or hunger, they hang back from seeking any service which would impose a check upon their personal freedom . . .' This in turn was related to their sense of identity as a former ruling class: if questioned quietly, a Gond would reveal his belief that 'his race were formerly the original masters of the land . . .' If lordship was impossible, then independent foraging for consumption and sale combined with casual labour was the best option. 'The Ghond supplies his small wants by resorting to the villages below the hills, where he barters the produce of the jungle for cotton cloths etc. . . .'[37] The regular toil and long-term commitment that peasant agriculture demanded was also distasteful. So, for example, in the 1820s an experienced official testified that in the Chandore subdivision of (present-day) Nasik district almost all the villages had Bhil watchmen, who were paid by a share of the harvest. Some of the watchmen also held tax-free lands – these were rented out, and only one Bhil actually cultivated himself. Those who were not village policemen subsisted by 'selling wood and grass and engaging in labour . . .'[38] By the later nineteenth century, as the combined effects of population growth,

[35] Cited in Arvind M. Deshpande, *John Briggs in Maharashtra* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1987), p. 103. The government often succumbed to such demands – for example in 1819 Dhun Singh of Amba received 'a pension of Rs.360 per annum to keep quiet'. *SRBG*, 26, p. 230.

[36] Ibid., p. 108.

[37] Bradley, 'Ghonds', pp. 211, 212, 182.

[38] Deposition of Sedashew Keshav, App. to BJP P/400/15 20 Feb.1828 no. 8.

forest conservancy and forest clearance began to bite, a steady stream of tribal migrants began to flow to distant destinations. Some of these – such as those who went to plantations overseas and to Assam – were more or less permanent emigrants; but seasonal emigrants formed the bulk of this flow. Crispin Bates has suggested that in some newly cleared regions of central India such migrants provided much of the work-force that built the railways and sustained a booming commmercial agriculture in the later nineteenth century.[39]

Essentially, therefore, we see a vigorous attempt to avoid reduction to the status of peasant or agrarian dependant, and, if lordship was inaccessible, to maintain (even at the cost of considerable hardship) a forager life-style – mobile, adaptable, independent. All accounts concur on the importance of markets in permitting this strategy: forest peoples evidently preferred the fleeting contact of buyer and seller to fettering themselves into more durable economic relations – whether to a master or to the land. Following from this, they preferred fixed task-work to other forms of employment. This was true even of thoroughly demilitarised groups like the Katkaris; Mackintosh observed in the early nineteenth century that during

> the very hot weather and the rainy season, they remain at home in their huts at the extremity of villages where they reside, and while a few of them realise some pyce daily by selling selling grass and firewood in the bazar, others of them work as labourers for the cultivators . . . They are paid both in money and in grain for their work, occasionally receiving one or two meals a day in addition; but as they have naturally an aversion to labour, they prefer jobbing, or contracting for the work they have to undertake; they will then, men, women and children, work from morning to night, and this for several days, scarcely partaking any refreshment all this time, until they have completed their task. After they have received the reward of their labour, it is equally apportioned among all, young and old; they then return to their huts to enjoy as long a rest as they can, until they are forced again by hunger to assume the task of labourers.[40]

But this precarious existence could easily slip into debt-slavery. The linkage between settlement and servitude was early observed in Khandesh by an officer attempting to settle Bhils to cultivation. G. A. Rigby wrote in 1825 of the 'state of thraldom' to which village headmen often sought to reduce the Bhils. The Bhils at this time were still however, capable of retaliation, and so this oppression, Rigby continued, was 'the

[39] Crispin Bates, 'Class and Economic Change in Central India', in Clive J. Dewey (ed.) *Arrested Development in India: The Historical Dimension* (Delhi: Manohar 1988), and 'Tribal Migration in India and Beyond', in Gyan Prakash (ed.), *The World of the Rural Labourer* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[40] Mackintosh, 'A Short Account of the Kattouries', pp. 328–9.

fruitful source of many disorders' and had 'a tendency to urge these people to seek refuge in the Hills . . .'[41]

Having ferocious kinsmen in the forest could indeed redress the balance. In 1830 the Patel of a south Gujarat village refused to allow the sons of 'his' Dubla servant to leave his employ and forcibly recovered them when they left. One night, a gang of men came and murdered the Patel, extracted his hoarded cash from its hiding place, and left for the forest, accompanied by the Dublas and their families.[42] One consequence of 'pacification' was that the possibility of redress by such methods would be sharply reduced. The Bhils were seen as posing a political threat well into the nineteenth century, and much effort was expended by a succession of special officers in trying to convert them into peasants. An official wrote of the Khandesh Bhils in the 1850s:

> Those of the tribe who are neither in the employ of Government, nor village servants, procure a livelihood for themselves and their families by cultivating the soil; cutting and selling grass, firewood and timber; gathering and selling jungle fruits, roots, herbs, gums, honey, &c.; and during the harvest season, by watching the Ryuts' grain-fields, reaping crops &c.; while some of them take permanent service with the Ryuts as ploughmen . . .[43]

So the Agents sought to settle the hill Bhils down as cultivators, and considerable sums were advanced for this task, the money being expended 'under the immediate superintendence of the Agent, and never entrusted to the improvident squandering of the Bheel . . .' All aspects of life of the Bhils came under the supervision of the Agents, who endeavoured to break 'their prejudices against labour', and eradicate 'their propensities to plunder and debauchery.' Bhils outside the settlements were also supervised; a 'Daroga Karkoon [clerk] was employed in each Talooka, constantly moving from village to village, to see that orders were attended to, and that the Bheels were present and busy with their ploughs; a Daroga Seebundee [orderly] was stationed in each colony, to superintend and overlook its proceedings . . .'[44] One suspects that the Bhils would find life under this system almost equivalent to agrestic serfdom; and many might well prefer to pick up a living on the margins of agriculture, by collecting and selling forest produce, hunting and occasional labour, without tying themselves down to the hard and, all too often, unrewarding routines of peasant life. As Rose, Bheel Agent in 1855 described it, their fields became unproductive in a few years for want of manure, and they 'found their wants for the moment better

[41] PA, DCR vol. 202 No.1782 G. A. Rigby Bheel Agent to Collr. Candeish, 30 June 1825, para.3.
[42] OIOC BJP 6 February 1828 P/400/15 no. 5: report by the Collector of Surat.
[43] *SRBG*, 26, pp. 224–5.
[44] *SRBG*, 26, pp. 219, 220.

supplied by leaving their own fields in order to guard those of Ryuts for hire'.[45]

The hireling might then easily slip into hereditary bondage. A recognition of this fact probably underlay the distrust with which proletarian groups like the Katkaris viewed steady agricultural labour, and their emphasis on mobility and independence. The alternative to independence and poverty was all too often agrestic servitude (and poverty). The *Thana Gazetteer* commented of the 'early tribes': '[t]he name of bondage ceased with the introduction of British rule. But with many of the *more settled* of the wilder tribes the reality of slavery remained, and their nominal freedom only served to bring them under new and harder masters.' The 'less settled', the *Gazetteer* added, sustained their independence by making catechu for sale and swidden cultivation – but these avenues were gradually closed by the Forest Department.[46] A nomadic life might in fact help them evade the clutches of the usurers: in 1885 a Brahman landlord and moneylender told the Forest Commission: 'I have no money-lending dealings with the Katkaris. They are a roving tribe and can offer no security. Moreover they cannot be trusted.'[47] Mobility destroyed credit, but protected independence.

Mobility might be chosen – but it might also be enforced. Wanderers inspired hostility and fear among settled folk – this is reflected, for example, in an early classic of rural sociology in Maharashtra, Atre's *Gaon-Gada*, which is replete with hostile stereotypes of such peoples.[48] Hence the village authorities would move them on after some time. Equally, forest labour and forest products were seasonally available, and their locations varied: their users had to be migratory. The Katkaris, for example, whose profession was the extraction of catechu (*kat*) from the *khair* tree would have normally moved considerable distances in search of it. Furthermore, while the demand for timber and forest products grew rapidly through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the extraction in particular localities was liable to sudden variations, and this would result in large changes in the local requirement of forest labour. Hence, as the Forest Department and its contractors took control, they also needed a mobile, flexible labour force, and could impose mobility upon some communities – especially on those like the Katkaris, who were already habituated to a migrant, proletarian existence. Thus the Katkaris taken to work in the Dangs in 1854–5 were warned by the local

[45] *SRBG*, 26, 'Bheel Tribes' continuation by J. Rose, p. 225.
[46] *Thana Gazetteer*, 13, 1 (1882), pp. 155–6; emphasis added.
[47] *Bombay Forest Commission*, II, p. 5.
[48] T. N. Atre, *Gaon-Gada* (1915; repr. Pune: Varda Books, 1989), pp. 116–41.

Forest Officer to leave before 15 June.[49] This pattern of periodic eviction may explain the apparent paradox that struck a Collector of Kolaba district in 1950. He noted that, despite the allotment of land for swidden fifty years earlier, the Katkaris

> are leading the same primitive life, have to go without food and clothing for days together, are utterly ignorant of the changing world; all this in spite of the fact that the Government have given them thousands of acres of land with nominal assessment, and it is well known that but for their labour it would never have been possible for the Government to sell the [forest] coupes at a competitive price.[50]

The possibility that the diversion of their labour to timber work on a more or less compulsory basis was what had prevented their settling to agriculture does not seem to have occurred to him. Generations of life at the beck and call of contractors and officials also generated a characteristic outlook, or habitus (to borrow Bourdieu's term).[51]

> The Katkari has no interest in any work and in being uplifted and hence will not cooperate with any Society or any scheme, though it may be all for his own good. They have not seen any Katkari come up, they have no confidence in people, having been much ill-treated particularly by the forest contractors and also, it must be admitted, by the Police. They have no success in any scheme organised for them. The Katkari lives for the day, the morrow is not his concern, and hence very little can be done for him.[52]

In the new regime of the forests, mobility had ultimately proved a bad choice. Furthermore, the life of the independent forager, trader and wood-cutter could not sustain large numbers, and the numbers of the forest tribes as whole certainly increased through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was also a period when the forests themselves began to shrink and tillage expand throughout Western India; and the woodland that remained began to be fenced off by the Forest Department. Persons failing to gain a livelihood in the older ways began to gradually drift into the margins of the ever-expanding agricultural system, not now as predators and warriors but as proletarians and dependants.[53] The fate of these casualties was commonly servitude, a condition that many officials viewed with equanimity, since it ensured sedentarisation. A settlement officer in Nandurbar taluka commented

[49] Report for 1854–5, App. A, p. 40 in *Forest Reports of the Bombay Presidency for 1849–50–1855–56.*

[50] E. Francis Collr. Kolaba to Chief Conservator of Forests, Bombay, 17 April 1950, in K. J. Save, *Report on the Grant of Dalhi and Other Waste Land to the Katkaris and Thakurs in Kolaba District* (Government of Bombay, nd), p. 57.

[51] P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 52–5.

[52] Francis, letter of 17 April 1950, in Save, *Dalhi Land*, p. 61.

[53] Pithily described by Jan Breman as wage hunters and gatherers.

approvingly in 1862 that 'many Bheels (who are generally speaking so averse to employing themselves in agricultural pursuits) have been induced by these Goozurs to take service with them, and they appear to have become very useful farm servants.'[54] Two knowledgeable officials wrote of the same area in 1870: 'We state as a positive fact that the *Bhil Autyas* [ploughmen] *of these three talukas are the slaves of their Guzar masters, forced to labour, bought sold and transferred from one to another like so many cattle . . .*'[55]

The passage of Act XIII of 1859 (intended to benefit the Assam tea planters) put an additional weapon into the hands of landlords, since breach of contract could now be punished by imprisonment. A Khandesh official, E. Lawrence, protested that it 'put an extra means of power into the hands of an already powerful enough class i.e. the agriculturist who has servants under him who are very much in the position of serfs'.[56] Even after magistrates stopped enforcing such contracts, the landlords could still obtain decrees from the civil courts, which, conferred 'a hold on [the labourer] of the most powerful description'.[57] These powers may well have led to intensified exploitation: an official enquiring into cases of desertion by farm servants (*saldars*) commented that 'the faithlessness of the Saldar is as much due to the close-fistedness and hard dealing of the master as to want of principle in the servant'.[58] Even those who escaped servitude often lived in utter dependence on moneylenders; in Nawapur area, for example, a British officer reported as early as 1848 that the population was composed of Gujarati traders, Parsi spirit sellers and Bhils. Whatever the Bhil grew was made over at once to the *baniya*, who paid the government tax, and doled out subsistence to the Bhil; 'the Banias are the virtual owners of the land, and the Bheels their bondsmen.'[59] Nor had the situation improved even after the cotton boom and the opening of the first railway line brought a qualified prosperity to Khandesh in the later nineteenth century; the Assistant Collector in charge of its western sub-divisions in

[54] *SRBG*, 93, p. 473.

[55] C. Pritchard and O. Probyn, 31 August 1870, in *Report of the Commission on the Riots in Poona and Ahmednagar* (Bombay Government Press, 1876), App. B, p. 172; emphasis original. The report of this Commission was one of the most widely used official documents of the later nineteenth century; the failure to act upon the above-cited letter strongly suggests that the government took a complacent view of servitude as long as it ensured settlement.

[56] BARD, 17 of 1881, Annual Rept. of E. Lawrence Asst.Collr. para. 22.

[57] BARD, 24 of 1885, Annual Rept. of J. Davidson Asst.Collr., 13 July 1885, para. 11.

[58] BARD, 17 of 1882 Annual Report of H. J. Ommaney Asst. Collr., 12 July 1882, para. 22.

[59] OIOC, Bombay Rev. Pros. No.8182 vol. 377/32 J. Inverarity to Collr. Khandesh, 6 November 1848.

1879 did not see much improvement in the position of the Bhils. In the hill tracts, (he wrote) they were not being displaced, because the land was not rich enough to attract outsiders, while the climate was 'unbearable to foreigners'; but in the plains Bhil cultivators would

> generally fall sooner or later into the hands of money-lenders, and lose the ownership of the land they have been allowed to cultivate until it has become worth the money-lender's while to oust them. Now that the boundaries of cultivation are fixed by Forest Conservancy and cultivation itself is rapidly extending there seems a danger that the Khandesh Bhil will cease to appear as a cultivator at all.[60]

The extent to which Bhils were, in fact integrated as peasant cultivators in the mid nineteenth century, may be estimated from the records generated by the land revenue survey operations in Khandesh between 1854 and 1866, which among other things, recorded the number of ploughs and plough cattle held by different communities in several subdivisions of the district. The survey was introduced in order to regulate the land tax and encourage the spread of cultivation, and hence did not extend to the more thinly settled regions. It also tended to focus on east and central Khandesh, most of which falls into present-day Jalgaon district. The survey therefore essentially gives us a picture of the agrarian sector as it existed in the middle of the nineteenth century. Since permanent cultivation depended on bullock-drawn ploughs and other equipment, the possession of these assets is a good indication of the capacity of different communities to sustain independent production (table 8.1)

On examining table 8.1 it becomes immediately evident that nowhere did the Bhil share of the ploughs or plough animals approach their share of the population, and that in several areas their share was quite negligible. In the aggregate they formed 6.9 per cent of the population in the surveyed area and possessed 1.5 per cent of the ploughs. Essentially therefore, most Bhils at this time were not a self-sufficient peasantry, but rather a more or less floating rural proletariat. They probably constituted the bulk of those termed *rakhwaldars* or *jaglias* – terms meaning guards or night-watchmen, large numbers of whom appear in the censuses.

In addition to their earnings from this, the Bhils were also heavily dependent on the market in timber and forest produce. Thus when the first efforts to prohibit the felling of certain trees began in the late 1840s, we find the Bheel Agent in Khandesh, living up to his role as surrogate Naik, warning the Collector:

[60] BARD, 22 of 1879: H. T. Ommanney, Asst.Collr. to Collr. Khandesh, 4 July 1879, para. 11.

Table 8.1. *Percentage shares of Bhils and Pardhis in population and agricultural stock in various sub-divisions of Khandesh 1854–1866*

Subdivision	Population	Ploughs	Agricultural Cattle
Nasirabad	4.5	0.3	0.2
Chopda	5.2	1.5	1.9
Raver Peta	4.6	2.9	2.4
Amalner	6.9	0.4	0.7
Erandol	3.5	0.2	0.3
Virdhul	11.3	1.3	1.6
Songir	10.1	1.3	1.4
Dhulia	10.4	2.1	2.1
Nandurbar	26.9	8.1	8.0
Chalisgaon	5.8	2.2	2.4
Lohara	3.3	0.8	0.6
Warangaon	1.5	0.3	0.4

Source: Compiled from the statistical appendices to taluka settlement reports printed in the following *SRBGs*: nos.72, 93 and 97.

In this order you have included all the Hill Bheels of the Sathpoorah and Sathmala Range of mountains, and consequently completely stopped the livelihood of all the predatory classes and thrown them back on their ancient mode of living by Bow and Arrow, and in all probability by plunder also . . .

The intercourse they were having with the villagers in the plain will now cease with the object of it, namely, traffic in teak wood, by which they purchased the necessaries of life – and they will be obliged to forsake the food of Flour and grain for raw meat and roots and will, I fear, descend to the savage state of times gone by.[61]

This was, of course, based on a misapprehension of conditions in days gone by, and neither the environmental nor the political conditions for the realisation of this prophecy existed at the time, in great measure precisely because of the successes of the Bhil Agents themselves. The pacification that they had imposed had broken down the political structures of the Bhil polities, and therefore their capacity to mantain boundaries and control the woodlands. So the custom of Bhils levying a toll on all wood cut by others appears to have died out (see p. 165) A growing population of Bhils came to subsist by the timber trade – a missionary at Nawapur in the late nineteenth century observed hundreds of Bhil carts loaded with heavy timber, proceeding to Nandurbar weekly market during the cold season.[62] The overall effect was that the

[61] BARD, 96 of 1850, A. Morris to Collr. Khandesh, 18 April 1850, pp. 55–6.
[62] O. A. Dahlgren, *Our Bheel Mission in India*, p. 7.

possibility of successful resistance had largely disappeared. When this appeared to have been achieved, as in the Satpura hills bordering the Nizam's territory, the post of Bhil Agent was itself abolished. The loud sympathy of subordinate officials could not stay the juggernaut of social and political change set rolling by the colonial regime – efforts to turn its course, both before and after independence, form the theme of the next chapter.

9 From sanctuaries to safeguards: policies and politics in twentieth-century India

Protective custody for infant races

In the previous chapter I argued that the latter half of the nineteenth century saw the colonial government embarking on policies of constructive conservation for both society and environment. I term it constructive because it aimed at reconstituting an order of things that was presumed to have existed at some time in the past, and not at freezing the current status quo. It was therefore distinctly interventionist, both ecologically and socially. The uprising of 1857 gave a strong impetus to social conservation, leading, most famously to a reversal of policy regarding the landlords of Awadh, but also (in our region) influencing policy towards groups such as the Gujarat talukdars. These men had been treated as mere leaseholders in the early decades of British rule, and their social decline viewed with equanimity. The explosion in 1857 changed the official outlook and, after some deliberation, the Bombay Government passed Act VI of 1862, giving them hereditary property rights. In order to prevent these being seized by their creditors, the Act provided for a state arbitration of their debts and the takeover of estates for a period of twenty years during which as much as possible of the debt would be paid off. Any debt remaining after two decades would be cancelled.[1] This legislation represented a dramatic break with laissez-faire and unlimited protection of property rights.[2] It was followed by a more active deployment of the Court of Wards to save the rural gentry from expropriation, and the Government of India's Encumbered Estates Act of 1881 was subsequently enacted for the same end.[3] The outlook behind such measures was made explicit in the *Report* of the Talukdari

[1] *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency Vol. IV: Ahmedabad* (Government Press Bombay, 1879), pp. 180–4.
[2] A point made several decades ago by Ghurye, *The Scheduled Tribes*, pp. 203–4.
[3] The use of the Court of Wards as an instrument of social conservation is discussed by Anand A. Yang; see *The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Colonial India, Saran District 1793–1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 81–9.

Settlement Officer in 1885–86. After describing the poverty of the 'Thakors' (lords) he explained it as due to the fact that

> the legislature considers these Talukdars as being capable of entering into contracts on equal terms, whereas most of them in reality are only grown-up children or idiots. If this class of landholders is to be saved from destruction on political or other considerations, the Civil Courts should be shut against them in the same way as they are shut against children or persons of unsound minds.[4]

This logic became increasingly popular in the later decades of colonial rule, and so many measures were justified by it that South Asia was evidently viewed as a gigantic creche. After the landlords it was the turn of peasant proprietors and tenants. Legislation in their favour was most notable in the permanently settled areas of Eastern India, where no loss of state revenue or political influence would result from it, but it was haltingly introduced elsewhere as well. Agrarian agitations and revolts – as in Chota Nagpur – often produced regional legislation; but it is noteworthy that all the new laws were aimed at protecting groups that were already entrenched in the agrarian sector as owners or tenants. Labourers, on the other hand, could safely be left to the mercies of the market. As far the semi-proletariat of the forests was concerned, their reduction to servitude continued to be viewed with equanimity. So in Bombay Presidency, although the 'Deccan Riots' of 1875 were followed by legislation aimed at curbing the moneylenders – the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879 – this was initially applied in only four districts – Poona, Ahmadnagar, Sholapur and Satara, thus excluding the bulk of the forest tribes from its purview. In 1888, the acting Collector of Khandesh also saw their proletarianisation as desirable:

> We do not want to attract to the Agency villages Bhils already settled in the plains as Jaglias, Saldars and labourers. The Kunbis want more and not fewer field labourers and the Bhil is much more useful as a servant than as a bad cultivator. The object of the Agency is to get at the Bhils still living in the forests; to induce them to come out into the plains and settle down . . .[5]

The great famine of 1899–1900 caused large areas of land, especially marginal land in the hilly regions of the province, to revert to the State on account of the death or destitution of its holders. In 1901, the Bombay Government, arguing that the gift of absolute property rights had led to indebtedness and ruin, amended the Bombay Presidency Land Revenue Code to create an inalienable tenure, and substantial areas of land began to be allocated on this tenure. As it happened, much of this land was in hill and forest areas: not much land had been forfeited

[4] *Annual Report of the Talukdari Settlement Officer for the Year 1885–86*, p. 6.
[5] BARD, vol. 341 of 1888, W. W. Loch, Ag.Collr. Khandesh to Chief Secretary, 21 January 1888, p. 113.

elsewhere. The obvious allottees, therefore, were tribals, and this became established as a policy by the 1920s. In 1939, David Symington was able to show that in western Khandesh, most of the land left in the possession of tribals was held on this tenure. He also noted, however, that the moneylenders took away the entire product of the land, and then doled out small amounts as loans to sustain the cultivators, so that 'Bhils who have been saved from becoming landless labourers, have become instead a kind of serf, working their own fields for a bare maintenance . . .'[6] Even such limited protection would obviously benefit only groups that had settled to agriculture, and confer little advantage on the semi-proletarian communities in and around the forest: they were left to the tender mercies and humanitarian impulses, such as they were, of the Forest Department. Mobility was no longer a protection against servitude: Symington found that veiled systems of bondage enforced by the extra-legal power of toughs prevailed among the Katkari charcoal-burners in the Konkan.[7]

At the same time, as limited self-rule was being gradually conceded to Indians after 1919, the colonial government of India made consistent efforts to exclude certain areas – mainly forested and inaccessible ones – from the purview of constitutional reforms. The essential rationale was that elected politicians could not be expected to safeguard tribal interests, which would be better served by the British-controlled executive.[8] This protection, however, would be available only in certain specified areas, although the majority of tribals in fact lived outside these zones, often as labourers or tenants.[9] This policy may have had various motives: a prominent one perhaps being to check the tendencies (visible in both 1922 and 1930) for forest peoples to vent their grievances jointly with the nationalists. Thus the Government of India Act of 1935 provided for only twenty-four tribal seats out of a total of 1535 in the provincial legislatures; in the Central Provinces where 20 per cent of the population were classified as belonging to the 'aboriginal tribes', they received one Assembly seat.[10] A tacit surveillance reinforced this exclusion. Verrier Elwin, for instance, noted how closely any outsider's visits to forest villages were supervised, if not altogether prevented, in the

[6] Symington *Report*, pp. 5, 7–8.
[7] Ibid., pp. 41–2.
[8] This issue is thoroughly discussed by Ghurye, *The Scheduled Tribes*, pp. 98–132.
[9] See the 'Interim Report of the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas (Other than Assam), Sub-Committee' (to the Constituent Assembly), in B. Shiva Rao (ed.), *The Framing of India's Constitution: Select Documents*, 5 vols.(New Delhi: Indian Institute of Public Administration, 1968) III, pp. 733–4.
[10] *Report of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission 1960–61* (Delhi: Government Press, 1961), p. 30.

1930s.[11] A certain stridency that one finds in the writing of Symington for example, may also be related to the search for a new constituency and a suitably high moral stance, from which to castigate the nationalists. Curzon had employed the toiling peasants for this purpose, citing them as the 'real India' in contrast to overeducated babblers unmindful of the benefits of imperial rule, but repeated peasant agitations after 1917 had rather taken the shine off that argument.[12] The *maai-baap sarkar* (mother–father government) needed a more grateful set of children, and, by the 1930s, the 'child-like' aborigines were the best available candidates for the role. Symington felt that they would need the paternal guidance of the British for a generation, if not longer.[13]

'Uplift' and sedentarisation

Events belied his hopes, and at any rate, the worst of his fears. Various measures of protection were maintained and extended through the 1940s, and enshrined in the Constitution adopted in 1950. The Constituent Assembly took the major step of accepting the recommendation of the sub-committee that measures of tribal welfare could not be confined to a few areas, but had to cover tribal communities wherever they were to be found. Their political representation was assured by the reservation of seats for them in a joint electorate based on adult franchise.[14] This marked a crucial change of direction; British policy had been to try and save suitably sanitised remnants of the tribal order by insulating them from the larger society towards which economic and political changes were drawing them; the Assembly on the other hand, recognised the fact of growing integration and sought to provide safeguards for it.

Substantial resources were also made available for various programmes; at the same time, while the essential thrust was, as earlier, to encourage sedentary agriculture, the large-scale conversion of land to non-agricultural uses often displaced sedentary peasants into compulsory nomadism. Population growth also had a similar effect. New health measures – especially the control of malaria – allowed immigration and tighter administrative control in areas, such as the Dangs, where few

[11] Verrier Elwin, *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 292.

[12] See J. R. McLane, 'Peasants, Moneylenders and Nationalists at the End of the Nineteenth Century', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1, 1 (1963), 67.

[13] Symington, *Report*, p. 2.

[14] For the rationale of these measures see 'Interim Report of the ... Sub-Committee', pp. 733–9. A detailed consideration of the constitutional position is in Ghurye, *The Scheduled Tribes*, ch. 12.

outsiders had formerly ventured. The rapid extension of roads and development of motor transport also allowed the swift denudation of the woodlands, especially in the former princely states whose forests were theoretically coming under Forest Department control.[15] Overall, the forests themselves were dwindling with the steady growth in demand for their products and haphazard and ineffective management by the Forest Department. The Second World War in particular, had led to exploitative logging for a variety of purposes, and the process of denudation continued after independence.[16] More than ever, the mobile life on forest margin became economically unsustainable; the urban economy offered little beyond drudgery and squalor to the illiterate migrant, and so the need to establish some toehold on the land grew ever more pressing.

On the other hand, groups that managed to put forest land under more or less permanent tillage could hope to establish something like a customary property right in it. As Gadgil and Guha have pointed out, the rural poor

> can at best derive very low wages by working as forest labourers or by selling firewood, and since they do not share in the profits made from from the forest produce these wages always remain low, at the subsistence level. While the rural poor gain little by protecting the tree crop, so far they have always succeeded in establishing their ownership over a patch of land by cutting down the trees and putting it to the plough.[17]

Akhileshwar Pathak reported in 1994 that the encroached area in the whole of India was estimated (on the basis of fines collected) at 6 million hectares, or about a tenth of the area supervised by the Forest Department, and thought even this 'a gross underestimate'.[18] Food shortages remained acute in the early decades of independence, and between 1951 and 1976 2.5 million hectares formerly classified as forest were officially surrendered to cultivation.[19]

[15] When questioned by a government commission in 1960, the vilagers of one area pointed out that they owned no trucks, and 'reiterated how the ex-zamindars, in violation of their agreements, and the forest rules and laws, devastated vast areas right in front of officials'. *Report of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission 1960–61* (Chairman: U. N. Dhebar) (Delhi: Government of India Press, 1961), pp. 131–2.

[16] M. Gadgil and R. Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 139.

[17] Gadgil and Guha, *This Fissured Land*, p. 196.

[18] A. Pathak, *Contested Domains: The State, Peasants and Forests in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994), p. 95.

[19] Gadgil and Guha, *This Fissured Land*, p. 196.

Table 9.1. *Rural cultivator households in Maharashtra by tenurial status 1961*

Type of tenure of holding	All rural households	Scheduled Tribe households
Entirely owned	78.5	69.1
Entirely leased-in	7.3	21.6
Part-owned, Part-leased	14.2	9.3

Source: *Census of India 1961: Maharashtra*, X, pt. V-A, p. 237.

A balance sheet: land gain and land loss in tribal Maharashtra

The 1961 census of Maharashtra found 52 per cent of Scheduled Tribe male workers, and 51 per cent of females returning themselves as cultivators, as against 35 and 42 per cent who declared themselves agricultural labourers. The census also asked a 20 per cent sample of rural cultivator households about their tenurial position. The results for Maharashtra are shown in table 9.1.

Tribal cultivators were clearly in an inferior position in the tenurial hierarchy, and many more of them were tenants. The conventional wisdom on this issue is that this reflected the fact that they were being driven off the land. D. S. Kulkarni, for example, writes that land alienation 'started before Independence and has gained momentum after 1950.'[20] This proposition has attained the status of a truism but has rarely been tested. Long period comparisons are, however possible in two districts (Dhule and Jalgaon) of Maharashtra, where the Revenue Survey compiled a detailed record of the agricultural assets of different communities in 1854–66. Table 9.2 compares this with the findings of the Census of 1961.

We should note that the 1961 estimate is based on a census question addressed to the household head, and not on official land records. Assuming the error to be uniform across social categories, we compare the relative position in 1961 with that found by the settlement enumerations of 1854–66 (table 9.1). In this comparison, it emerges that tribals both in Jalgaon and Dhule were rather better off than in the mid nineteenth century. In the latter district, favoured by the availability of deforested land for cultivation, and safeguarded by the protected tenure, there was a dramatic increase in the share of land operated by the Scheduled Tribes over the 100 years under consideration. There is, of

[20] D. S. Kulkarni, 'The Bhil Movement in Dhulia District', p. 263 in K. Suresh Singh (ed.), *Tribal Movements in India*, 2 vols. (Delhi: Manohar, 1983).

Table 9.2. *Percentage shares of Scheduled Tribes in total agricultural assets and population in Khandesh* c. *1860–1991*

Period/district	Percentage of agricultural assets	Percentage of Scheduled Tribe Population	Assets/Population ratio
Dhule 1860	2.9	13.4	0.22
Dhule 1961	35.6	38.0	0.94
Dhule 1991	32.4	40.9	0.79
Jalgaon 1860	1.3	4.2	0.31
Jalgaon 1961	2.4	5.6	0.43
Jalgaon 1991	3.3	9.8	0.34

Sources: for 1860 as in Table 8.1 – assets refer to agricultural cattle only; for 1961 – calculated from *Census of India 1961: Vol. X Part III* and *Part V-A*; assets refers to share in agricultural land cultivated as returned by the 20 per cent sample of households. Area of land calculated from mid-points of the frequency distribution, and observed values in standardised units for the highest size-class estimated at 87.8 acres for both districts on the basis of *District Census Handbook 1961 – Dhulia*. Holdings of unspecified size omitted from the calculation. For 1991 – land in operated holdings from *Bulletin of the Agricultural Census 1990–91 – Maharashtra State* (Bombay: Govt. of Maharashtra, 1993); population from *Census of India 1991 – Maharashtra Part IIb*. Note: by 1990 98% of tribal holdings were wholly owned, so that operated and owned holdings are practically identical. In 1961 the percentage was 87 in Dhulia and 88 in Jalgaon.

course a degree of underestimation in the nineteenth-century survey, in that swidden farmers in the hills would tend to be omitted, but the *ten-fold* increase in Dhule cannot be explained away by such reasoning. Given the omissions in the 1850s, and the uncertainties inherent in the estimate for 1961, it is difficult to compare them to the data from the *Agricultural Census* of 1990–91; however it does appear that the tribal *share* in operated area fell in Dhule between 1961 and 1991. Since the total available area scarcely changed, this would imply an actual fall in absolute area operated. This may be explained by either the expropriation of owners or the eviction of tenants. In 1961, there would be 43,030 (87%) tribal owners, 2925 (6%) part-owners and 3415 (7%) pure tenants. By 1990 the latter two categories had practically disappeared, there were therefore about 88,000 owner-operators, or twice as many as in 1961. It is likely however, that many of the tenants of 1961 were driven off the land soon after the census; this would explain the major agrarian agitations at the end of that decade. Governmental action and economic changes thereafter not only checked the process, but managed in some degree to reverse it. Much of the increase in tribal landownership probably took place after independence, since Symington had reported in 1938 that the area of Bhil-owned land in the four tribal-dominated western sub-divisions of Dhule district was only 110,000 ha.

while by 1971 the total for a larger unit, the district, was found to be 194,000 ha., according to a special enquiry in the early 1970s.[21] By 1985–6 the area of tribal-owned land had grown to about 240,000 ha., and in 1990–91 fallen marginally to 238,000 ha. – *this indicates an increase of about 20 per cent since 1974.* The picture is broadly the same as far as our other district, Jalgaon is concerned. However, between 1961 and 1991 the tribal population in Jalgaon district increased much more rapidly than their landholdings – a phenomenon absent in Dhule. The increase was due to false returns, immigration or both. Thus the rural Scheduled Tribe population of Jalgaon was 93,000 in 1961, 196,000 in 1981, and 280,000 in 1991. Such rapid growth cannot be explained by natural increase. It is possible that the flourishing horticulture of the district had attracted landless migrants from other regions or states. In the Dhule district, in the long-run, the processes of clearance, settlement and restoration outweighed the effects of expropriation and proletarianisation. It is also possible that this area saw a net out-migration of the landless to the agriculturally favoured tracts of South Gujarat, a migration documented by Jan Breman. However, *it is undeniable that over a period of 130 years the tribal communities in Khandesh actually moved from being mainly landless to acquiring shares of land not much below their share of population.*

That land was being acquired is also suggested by the fact that (in Dhulia district) between the 1961 and 1981 censuses the number of Scheduled Tribe male main workers describing themselves as cultivators increased from 79,000 to 120,000, and then grew to 148,000 in 1991. In 1990–91 the number of Scheduled Tribe holdings recorded at the agricultural census was 101,000, giving the fairly plausible ratio of 1.47 male workers per holding. The proportion of agricultural labourers in the work-force increased over 1961–1991 but the increase was, in fact, larger for the non-tribal population.

Moving now to consider Kolaba (presently Raigad) district, another area for which long-period comparisons are possible, we may recollect that the proportion of landowners among the Thakurs had increased by approximately 80 per cent, and of tenants quadrupled between 1880 and 1949 (see above, p. 106) The Katkaris made little progress over the same period: Save found only 152 of them as landowners and 1715 as tenants in 1949. In the aggregate, 608 Katkaris and Thakurs together owned 4381 acres of land, and 3928 rented in another 12,719 acres. The owned area amounted to 0.74 per cent of the private lands in the

[21] S. N. Dubey and Ratna Murdia (eds.), *Land Alienation and Restoration in Tribal Communities in India* (Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House 1977), p. 73.

district, and the rented to 3.56 per cent of the tenanted area.[22] The boundaries of the district changed after this survey, but Thakurs and Katkaris still constituted 94 per cent of the tribal population. In 1961, the scheduled tribes (Katkaris, Thakurs and a few Kolis) formed 9 per cent of the population, and had 7 per cent of the operated holdings; however, 58 per cent of these were pure tenants. While an exact comparison is not possible because of the omission of Kolis from Save's count in 1949, here again, there seems to be little doubt that substantially more tribals acquired land than lost it between 1949 and 1961, and that the proportion of owners among them increased significantly. After this, however their share was reduced, due both perhaps to expropriation as a result of the growth of Greater Bombay and consequently spiralling land values, and to the landless fraction increasing due to the immigration of landless tribals from elsewhere. By 1991, they had only 8,077 or 3.1 percent of holdings and 4.2 per cent of area, with 12.8 per cent of the population. However, these would almost all be owned holdings, and so the number of tribal landowners would have grown from perhaps 800 in 1949 to around 8000 in 1991. Tribals here therefore suffered a relative but not an absolute deprivation.

North of Bombay lies Thane district where dispossession, we may recall, was proceeding apace after the opening of the B. B. & C. I. Railway in the late 1860s. In the coastal Mahim taluka Varlis, Kolis, Koknis and Katkaris owned only 9.6 per cent of the land in 1873–4 and 5.6 per cent a decade later. In Dahanu taluka the fall over the same period was from 41.8 to 23.9 per cent. It fell further in the early twentieth century and Symington in 1938 found 'Aboriginal and hill tribes' holding only 6.8 per cent of the land in Dahanu taluka – little over a quarter of their holdings in the 1880s.[23] A few years after Symington's inquiry, Thana district saw a massive agitation led by the Kisan Sabha which among other things, alarmed the Government of Bombay into creating the first Forest Labour Cooperatives.[24] It may also have led to a more rigorous implementation of tenancy legislation, for the critical survey by Dandekar and Khudanpur remarked that Thana and Kolaba districts showed a 'firmer enforcement of the provisions of the [Tenancy] Act'.[25] The 1961 Census found tribals constituting 42 per cent of both cultivators and rural population in Thana, but 51 per cent of them were pure tenants, while only 18 per cent of the

[22] Save, *Dalhi Land*, Appendix tables.
[23] *Papers . . . Deccan Agriculturist's Relief Act*, II, p. 61; Symington, *Report*, p. 29.
[24] Parulekar, *Jevha Manusa Jaga Hoto, passim.*
[25] V. M. Dandekar and G. J. Khudanpur, *Working of Bombay Tenancy Act, 1948: Report of Investigation* (Pune: Gokhale Institute, 1957), p. 113.

non-tribal farmers fell into that category. Tribals reported holdings that were slightly larger than average, but much their land was of inferior quality.[26] Here too, therefore, tribals tended to entrench themselves in the farming sector and enlarge their share of farmland. This tendency intensified in later decades, and in 1991 the Scheduled tribes held 37.6 per cent of the operated area in Thane district up from perhaps 21 per cent in 1961. Almost all of this was owned land. They made up 46 per cent of the rural population of the district.[27] As in Dhule district, the movement was from a situation of near-landlessness in the later colonial period to land-acquisition after independence. In this district struggles over the regularisation of 'encroachments' on forest land were the major issue, suggesting that a substantial area was held in that form – one unrecorded in the agricultural censuses.

The four districts discussed above held a major portion – 50 per cent in 1961 – of the Scheduled Tribe population of Maharashtra, and so it may be worth asking whether the same phenomena were visible elsewhere in the state. A satisfactory answer would need much detailed resarch, but we may launch the inquiry with a scrutiny of the data found in the population and agricultural Censuses taken since 1961 in the State. In that year a 20 per cent sample of enumerated households were asked about the land they operated. The enumerators were specifically instructed to exclude 'households whose members work only as agricultural labourers'. There were some difficulties, especially with households who could not state the area they tilled, even in local measures. In other cases fear of land ceiling legislation led to under-reporting, but the Report added since the great majority of holdings were well below the ceilings, the picture was, on the whole reliable.[28] If so, there were 3,315,410 cultivating landowners in the rural areas of the State; of these 6 per cent belonged to the Scheduled Tribes. (This category includes owners who rented in some land.) There were also 260,545 pure tenants; of these 21 per cent were from the Scheduled Tribes. Persons classified as belonging to the Scheduled Tribes in 1961 constituted 6.1 per cent of the state's population. On the whole, therefore, it would seem that the tribal share of the operated land matched their population. The distribution of reported holdings by size-groups is given in table 9.3.

By 1990–91 the Scheduled Tribes had swelled to 9.27 per cent of the population, and they made up 6.70 per cent of farm-operators, while

[26] Census of India 1961 *District Census Handbook – Thana* Tables B-X and SCT V-B and pp. 25–6.
[27] Calculated from *Bulletin of the Agricultural Census 1990–91 – Maharashtra State.*
[28] *Census of India 1961: Maharashtra Vol. X pt. III*, pp. 3–4.

Table 9.3. *Distribution of operated holdings by size-class in Maharashtra 1961: 20 per cent sample of rural households only*

Size (ac.)	NT Owned	NT Rented	NT Mixed	ST Owned	ST Rented	ST Mixed
Below 1	23,582	7008	2653	853	876	19
1 – 2.4	81,337	13,078	10,165	4331	3632	296
2.5–4.9	87,401	7256	15,253	6105	2588	746
5 – 7.4	75,803	3388	11,364	6140	1261	723
7.5–9.9	41,824	1593	7116	3560	541	449
10–12.5	51,313	2186	7386	4246	649	507
12.5–14.9	20,008	740	5004	1373	181	310
15 – 29.9	90,328	4248	21,831	6387	1027	1159
30 – 49.9	34,660	1285	10,552	1403	205	412
50 & above	16,994	325	5578	327	23	142
Unknown	3371	15	14	504	4	3
TOTAL	526,171	41,122	96,916	35,229	10,987	4,766

Note: T = Tribal; NT = Non-tribal; Mixed refers to holdings containing both owned and rented land. Unknown refers to holdings where the cultivator could not specify the size.
Source: Compiled from *Census of India 1961: Vol. I, Part III (i)*.

their holdings occupied 7.32 per cent of the operated area of individual and joint holdings in the state.[29] Thus their increased population share was not matched by a similar rise in their share of agricultural land. May we attribute this to their expropriation during the intervening three decades? *Prima facie*, the answer is no. In 1961 199,975 of them owned at least part of the land they cultivated, and another 54,935 were purely tenants, or a total of 254,910. The number of men returning themselves as cultivators was 385,000 and women 339,000. This would give approximately 1.5 men and 1.3 women per holding. By 1990 the number of holdings (now almost entirely owned) had swelled to 633,840, and main workers per holding comes to 1.2 men and 0.8 women. ('Main worker' was a narrower class than the 1961 category 'worker'.) Broadly speaking, it can be said that the number of Scheduled Tribe-owned holdings increased by over 200 per cent; the number of male cultivators by 100 per cent but the enumerated tribal population increased by 200 per cent, or trebled from 2.4 to 7.3 million. However, while 52 per cent of tribal male 'workers' in 1961 declared themselves to be cultivators only 38 per cent of 'main workers' did so in 1991. The evident conclusion is that the main reason for the increased landlessness among the ST population of 1991 as against the ST population of 1961 is the change in the population falling in that category at the two dates,

[29] Data from *Bulletin of Agricultural Census 1990–91*.

and not the expropriation of landholding tribals in those three decades. The changed composition may in turn be partly explained by the removal of area restrictions in 1976; these restrictions had meant that certain Scheduled Tribes could only be recorded as such provided they lived in specified areas. It is likely that many out-migrants would thus have been excluded in 1961; and it is reasonable to suppose that the landless would be disproportionately represented among such migrants. Their reinclusion would swell the numbers of the Scheduled Tribes after 1976. This would account for some of the change; most of it would, however have to be explained by the infiltration of the Scheduled Tribes by other groups.

In fact this is, ironically enough, another indicator of progress. By the 1970s Scheduled Tribe identity was actively sought by persons whom government fiat had excluded from that category. The relatively efficient state government in Maharashtra clearly managed to deliver visible benefits and there was a rush to acquire ST identity in that decade, especially in east and central Maharashtra. Overall, the Scheduled Tribes (adjusted for comparability) grew by only 23 per cent 1961–71 and but an implausible 50 per cent in 1971–81.[30] In the most extreme case, 7205 Halba/Halbi had been enumerated in 1971 but 242,819 were found in 1981.[31] In this case there had been a mass influx of weavers (Halba Koshti) claiming to be Halbas. The phenomenon was visible even before the Census of 1981, and during 1980 B. N. Madavi, MLA from Armori in Chandrapur district was organising meetings and rallies demanding the cancellation of a Government order giving concessions to the Halba Koshtis.[32] The process of identity change was described by a concerned official in 1988. It started with individuals using a sub-caste name similar to that of some Scheduled Tribe. When successful in gaining benefits

> these efforts resulted into [*sic*] a community movemement and as a result of which social organisations of non-Scheduled Tribe people were formed and through these organisations united efforts took place to derive concessions of Scheduled Tribes for the entire caste.

Where the benefit in question was a valuable one, such as admission to a Medical or Engineering course, candidates often took the matter through various courts, including the Supreme Court of India. The courts stipulated that each person had to be considered separately, and

[30] J. S. Gaikwad, 'A Demographic Profile of Tribals in Maharashtra State' *Tribal Research Bulletin*, 9, 1 (1986), 19.

[31] Laxminarayana, 'The Problem of Pseudo-Tribals in Maharashtra', *Tribal Research Bulletin*, 14, 2 (1992), 12.

[32] *Annual Report on the Administration of Scheduled Areas in Maharashtra State 1980–81*, p. 81.

many cases were lost by default because the Scrutiny Committee did not have the resources to defend them.[33]

But such infiltration once admitted do our numbers not lose their relevance? After all, it could be that non-tribal landowners now got themselves classified as tribals, and it is their holdings that explain the apparent increase in tribal land. While this may have happened in some cases, it cannot explain the entire phenomenon, or even major part of it. To begin with, the massive increase in 'Scheduled Tribe' numbers 1971–81 occurred chiefly in East Maharashtra – Vidarbha and Marathwada. J. S. Gaikwad has calculated the decadal increase in the tribal population at 122 per cent in Marathwada and 223 per cent in Vidarbha, as against only 7.6 per cent in West Maharashtra and 8.6 per cent in the Konkan.[34] If the increase in tribal landholdings was entirely a consequence of the entry of new elements into the Scheduled Tribes, then it should be observed *solely* in Marathwada and and Vidarbha. This is not in fact the case; in 1961 there were 54,775 tribal farm operators in the latter two regions; in 1990–91 the number of tribal holdings was 268,458, or a nearly five-fold increase. Many of these new landholders were probably drawn from the infiltrators into the tribal fold. Excluding these suspicious data, the rest of the State saw a growth from 200,135 to 368,382 – or an 84 per cent increase.[35] Thus our finding that tribals were entrenching themselves in the agrarian sector rather than being driven off the land is not undermined by the problem of boundary and definitional changes over time. We must conclude with the caveat that the acquisition of a tiny parcel of marginal land is no guarantor of prosperity in India today.

Economic structures, electoral politics and tribal communities

How are these various changes to be explained? Land-gain may in part be due to the fact that in India the educated and enterprising have, for two generations, been abandoning agriculture and opting for the better opportunities in government and the urban centres generally. This in turn reflects the far lower earnings per worker in agriculture when compared to other sectors of the economy.[36] Hence the acquisition of

[33] V. S. Deshmukh, 'Scrutiny of Scheduled Certificates: Why and How?' *Tribal Research Bulletin*, 10, 2 (1988), pp. 23–6.

[34] J. S. Gaikwad, 'A Demographic Profile of Tribals in Maharashtra State', *Tribal Research Bulletin*, 9, 1 (1986), 20–1.

[35] Calculated from *1961 Census vol. X Part V-A* and *Bulletin of the Agricultural Census 1990–91*.

[36] In the early 1970s a public sector employee already earned about ten times as much as

land – especially poor quality marginal land – by the tribal communities may bring a measure of security but will certainly not abolish poverty among them. The rest of the shift is (in my view) due in no small measure to political changes after independence. The Constitution of 1950 extended the vote to all adults over age twenty-one. While change was slow, the balance of forces gradually shifted with the rise of modern political organisations even among the more backward communities. Landownership was a major objective of these bodies. Thus in the 1970s, the Kisan Sabha was able to secure the regularisation of forest land occupied between 1972 and 1978 in Maharashtra. Bodies such as the Bhoomi Sena and the Shramik Sangathana also pushed these issues.[37] The Sangathana organised a major agitation in Dhule district in 1971–2, when the political classes were still shaken by the impact of the Naxalite movement. This agitation therefore startled the government into launching a drive to restore Adivasi lands that had been illegally transferred in the recent past. There was an intensive enquiry into tribal land alienation; and this found that the area formerly owned by tribals in Dhule district was 201,151 hectares, of which 6774 hectares had been (legally or illegally) transferred, leaving them, therefore, with 194,377 ha. their possession.[38] Meanwhile, population growth all over India accelerated as a consequence of better health care and stabler nutrition after independence, and by the 1960s land hunger was unprecedentedly acute. This certainly intensified the efforts of non-tribal peasants to secure tribal land, and many tenants may well have been ousted as landlords sought to sell off holdings threatened by tenancy legislation. Even if they were not ousted, it is possible that the inflow of migrants might marginalise them in areas that they had formerly dominated. However, a new political consciousness had replaced both the helpless apathy described by Symington, and the futile messianism studied by Hardiman, and these transfers were resisted, leading to the agitations of the early 1970s. After that, the process of expropriation in Maharashtra may have been checked, or slowed, by the uncertainty regarding title resulting from the retroactive legislation of 1974–5, and by the steady trickle of investigation and restoration cases thereafter. (The Act of 1975 retroactively nullified even legal transfers carried out between 1957 and 1974.) The initial impact of the drive was reported

an agricultural labourer; the wages of the former grew at 4.6 per cent over the next two decades while those of the latter increased at 2.9 per cent. See J. Dreze and A. Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, App. table A-4.

37 Ghanshyam Shah and Arjun Patel, *Tribal Movements in Western India: A Review of Literature* (Surat: Centre for Social Studies, 1993), pp. 17–20.

38 S. N. Dubey and R. Murdia (eds.), *Land Alienation and Restoration in Tribal Communities in India* (Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House, 1977), p. 73.

by Sharad Kulkarni, an activist unlikely to exaggerate the benefits of government action, as having been dramatic: 'the non-tribal transferees were shocked by the provisions of this Act. They did everything to thwart the implementation of this Act. Stay orders were obtained from the Bombay High Court and later on the Supreme Court.' The Act was upheld by a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court on 4 December 1984.[39] In Maharashtra state as a whole, up to 1981, a total of 29,273 cases of transfer had been investigated and 10,190 Adivasis put in possession of 17,727 hectares of land.[40]

Of course, not every tribal community benefited from the legislative and other changes, and many households certainly experienced both absolute and relative decline. In particular, the ability to obtain state resources, or to occupy and retain forest land, depended crucially on the ability utilise fora such as cooperatives and the electoral system. Opportunities in the modern political and economic system were therefore best utilised by communities that were already moving towards peasant farming, and subordinate peasants, like the Kokni/Kunbi often fared better than those who long adhered to the vestiges of their independent foraging life-style. A study of the Dangs in the 1980s commented that the 'Bhils were hardly interested in the cultivation of land. This task they left to their "Kunbi" immigrants. In course of time, the Bhils lagged behind Kunbis, Varlis, Gamits and Kokna cultivators.'[41] Similarly, in Nasik, descendants of the Bhil chiefs who had been pacified with tax-free lands in the nineteenth century rapidly alienated their lands when legal change made this possible; prior to this much of that land had lain uncultivated. The Collector who conducted the enquiry commented in 1976 that there was 'some kind of class structure among the Adivasis, with Bhils forming the lowest rung, the Koknas in the middle and the Kolis on the top'.[42] The last-named had, by the 1970s, begun to move off the land into the better opportunities in the cities. In the early 1970s Gare found that almost a fourth of the households surveyed reported the emigration of a family member to the city, and that the urban Koli community of Pune had prospered with 'steady and higher incomes from urban occupations'.[43]

[39] S. Kulkarni, 'Adivasis, Law and Justice', *Tribal Research Bulletin*, 8, 2 (1986), 1–7.

[40] *Annual Report on the Administration of Scheduled Areas in Maharashtra State 1980–81*, pp. 83–4.

[41] S. P. Punalekar, *Agricultural Profile of Dangs District* (Surat: Centre for Social Studies, 1989), p. 8. The study added: 'Their love for liquor, hunting and mobile life are also stated to be other factors behind their disaffection towards settled cultivation' (ibid.).

[42] K. Padmanabhaiah, 'Maharashtra (Nasik District)', pp. 62–3 in Dubey (ed.), *Land Alienation and Restoration*.

[43] G. Gare, *Tribals in an Urban Setting* (Pune: Shubdha Saraswat, 1976), pp. 47–51, 197.

Such movement would often require at least a modicum of education. Settlement to the hard routines of peasant agriculture may also have predisposed communities to invest in the tedious processes of education: already by 1961, the Koknas and Gamits had literacy rates exceeding those of the Bhils and similar to those of the Mahadev Kolis.[44] Literacy, while it often brought frustration and unemployment, also gave an understanding of the new political system. Their lead in education allowed the Koknas to dominate organisations such as the Forest Labour Cooperatives and other channels of government funding.[45] Education also gave rise to leaders such as Ambarsingh, whose initiative resulted in the formation in 1971 of the Shramik Sangathan in Dhule district. Its pressure not only contributed to the legislation of 1974–75, but also led the government to agree to redistribute denuded forest land to the Adivasis.[46] Prior to the formation of the Shramik Sangathan, Bhil protest had followed the essentially futile path of messianic cults.[47]

However, acquiring and holding land, especially marginal deforested land, could afford only a temporary respite. Real progress would require additional processes of social and economic development, without which older structures of economic and political power would tend to regenerate themselves under new leadership. So, for example, the Kisan Sabha agitation of the 1940s sharply reduced the power of landlords and police in the interior of Thana district, but its local cadres ultimately began to adapt themselves to market forces and opportunities. An independent inquiry was told in 1983 that many of them were 'were labour contractors, grass traders, toddy sellers and so on'. The inquiry report commented that 'in effect, the pre-1947 patterns were partially restored, using the CPI(M)'s social position as intermediary'.[48] Similarly, the Forest Labour Cooperatives sometimes became a new type of contractor; some of the societies surveyed by Govind Gare in the 1970s spent more on their office-bearers and functionaries than was paid to the ordinary working members as 'wages'; nor had the members received any dividend in the previous five years. Like most cooperatives in Nehruvian India, the FLCs had, however, helped develop a class of politico-economic entrepreneurs 'from amongst the Adivasis them-

[44] *Report of the Study Team on Tribal Development Programmes – Maharashtra* (Delhi: Planning Commission, nd [1967?]), table 3.
[45] Information supplied by Dr Satyakam Joshi, Surat, Centre for Social Studies.
[46] Kulkarni, 'The Bhil Movement', pp. 266–70.
[47] S. Fuchs, *Godmen on the Warpath: A Study of Messianic Movements in India* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1992), ch. IV.
[48] Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana *Repression in Dahanu-Where it Comes From: Findings of an Independent Fact-Finding Committee* (Bombay?, 1983), p. 42.

selves'. Gare thought this their major contribution.[49] In a subcontinent well removed from the best of all possible worlds, a visible 'Adivasi' share in venal office must be seen as progress for the community.

Conclusions

It is only to be expected that the convulsive social changes of the late twentieth century should see identities becoming more rather than less malleable, east and west alike. Thus the fact that Native American tribes could run casinos may well have contributed to the surfacing of a tribe in the unikely locale of New Jersey.[50] Identities in South Asia have been sufficiently malleable in the past; and are likely to become yet more ductile in the future as the advantages of such processes become apparent. Improved communications accelerate the homogenisation of culture, removing many markers of identity that were significant in the past. The disenchantment of the world makes transgression of boundaries more easily conceivable than heretofore. The policing of these increasingly artificial and highly permeable social boundaries by any state, however ominiscient, will almost certainly become increasingly difficult in the new millennium.

[49] G. M. Gare, 'Contribution of Forest Labourers' Cooperative Societies: Their Limitations and Possibilities ' *Tribal Research Bulletin*, 2, 2 (1980), 28.

[50] *The New York Times* (Metro Section), 1 January 1995, p. 34.

Conclusion

This book commenced with a critique of the twin concepts of relic forests and relic populations – both seen as mementoes of a time before history, an epoch of either (sadly) lost innocence or (happily) superseded savagery. I have striven to show that forests of varying but always significant extent long co-existed alongside, and among, the cleared lands of peasant settlement, and forest peoples existed as specialists in the optimal use of this niche. They exploited its plants and animals both for consumption and for trade, and thereby modified its size and composition. Woodland – especially the thorny secondary growth that came after human interference – was also a political and military resource. It was both a base and a refuge. Dispossessed elites and aspirant rulers both needed to use it as such, and to secure the support of its denizens. Control over and knowledge of this strategic domain was thus a tradeable resource in the regional political arena. The mobility, resourcefulness and weapon skills of the hunter were easily turned to military ends. Thus the forest folk were early integrated into the regional political economies that periodically linked up to form imperial systems in South Asia. Integration is, of course, not the same as assimilation; in fact specialisation requires difference – and such differences become in turn organising principles in inter-community relations.

All these changes did not leave the woodland communities unaffected. Flows of tribute and plunder encouraged little chiefs to set themselves up as hereditary monarchs and to cultivate the lifestyles of the rich and famous. A few lineages could rise to royal power, while their tribesmen simultaneously developed new identities linking them to other warrior communities of the subcontinent. Other users of the woodlands then had to accommodate themselves to the dominant ethnos. Agrarian crises could bring refugees into their territory and encourage the formation of a subordinate peasantry whose surpluses contributed to the lordly leisure of the woodland warriors. An ethnic mosaic would easily be transformed into an ethnic hierarchy. However, such processes in turn might hollow out the forest and attach it to the sown, creating a

new agrarian region or sub-region out of thicket and swamp. Climatic fluctuation or political collapse could once again bring thorn jungle or tree forest to cover abandoned fields and ruined cities. Forest dwellers' relations with the agrarian order were thus characterised by a mixture in continually varying proportions between predation and production, tribute and trade, and changes in this mix affected, and were affected by, the advances and retreats of the forest and the sown. Fairhead and Leach remark that ecologists in Africa seeking pristine forest have been disappointed to find potsherds beneath 'natural' vegetation – the larger and denser population of historic South Asia could hardly leave 'nature' unchanged.[1]

This political economy was profoundly modified in the last century of colonial rule. The model of village-centred peasant agriculture – long more ideal than real – was finally realised under colonial auspices in the backwash of the Industrial Revolution.[2] Except on the north-eastern and north-western boundaries of the empire, forest lords had to fit into this pattern or be hunted down; the woodlands, meanwhile retreated inexorably before axe and plough. The political hierarchy sustained by peasant tribute, and organised to extract it, also withered away, leaving a residue of titular kings of the forest to share paltry pensions. Ultimately the forest itself came under the control of a government department determined to assert a total control over this domain, and to maintain its inhabitants as a servile labour force for its needs. Formerly subaltern communities often settled more quickly into the limited niches available for peasant agriculture and thus were better placed to exploit the opportunities offered by development programs in independent India. Thus the Kokni of the Dangs have reversed their former subordination to the Bhils, and invoked the emotive sons of the soil theme in an effort to exclude others from their region. Erstwhile peasant warriors such as the Sahyadri Kolis have also made relatively successful use of new opportunities. Indeed, in the more prosperous regions of India the opportunities have been attractive enough (as we saw in chapter IX) to cause a silent migration across the supposedly primeval and impermeable social boundaries between tribe and caste. Inclusion and exclusion have themselves become the contingent on success in the electoral and political arena.

Much present-day scholarly understanding has failed to observe these changes, and remained (by and large) trapped in the sterile general-

[1] Leach and Fairhead, *Misreading the African Landscape*, p. 6.

[2] Christopher Bayly was the first scholar to note the great sedentarisation and point out its dramatic environmental consequences. See his *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman edn, 1988), pp. 144–6.

isations of obsolete textbooks. Social scientists have tacitly accepted that the transitions from forest to field and forager to farmer have been continuous and irreversible from early historic times. Again, the military and political predominance of the colonial agrarian order has been projected back 3,000 years to generate a mythic history of conquest and displacement. The first anthropologists were often government officials, and generally operated under the guidance and protection of local officialdom. It is not surprising that they failed to grasp how profoundly the activities of their kindly hosts and principal informants had modified the political, social and cultural life of the timeless tribals that they came to study. Barring a few exceptions such as Verrier Elwin, the anthropologists also failed to remark the political *cordon sanitaire* drawn around the woodlands by the colonial regime. They hence failed to appreciate either the unprecedented nature of this isolation, or the diverse socio-political trajectories by which various communities had arrived at their modern situations. Such apperceptions have come to be globalized in recent decades, contributing to the rise of that ideology of authentic indigenism and environmental virtue challenged in the introduction of this book. The challenge has been mounted through a scrutiny of historic South Asia. That scrutiny has, I think, convincingly shown that there was no single trajectory through historic time, whether that be seen as being from feckless forager to provident peasant, or from happy savage to miserable proletarian. That indeed, was the major object of the present work – to banish social and ecological stasis from the woodlands of the world, and to propose the reinstatement of the contingent, the political and historical therein.

Afterword

This volume opened with a some comments on how the understandings of the past have operated in the present: and it may be said that an agenda for the present is implicit in any assessment of the past – all history is in some degree, contemporary history. This would not be a false assessment of the present work. While I have endeavoured to be scrupulous in my procedures and exact in my citations, I could not have, and have not tried, to put Husserlian brackets around the world I live in whilst reading the traces of that world's past. Reverberations of current controversies are therefore to be found in many places throughout the text, and it is therefore appropriate that I should conclude by specifying what the implications of this narrative are, and are not, for the present. I may begin with the polemic that opened this work, which was directed against the notion that present-day social and ethnic divisions track ancient genetic distinctions. This is not a claim that extant social groups may not have measurable differences, phenotypic or genotypic. It does deny that their contemporary social situation is *causally linked* to those differences, and indeed that their current situation is necessarily an ancestral one. I think that I have sufficiently demonstrated that identities and ethnicities in the past were more fluid than has often been supposed, so that the possibilities of change and (dare I say it?) progress in the present cannot be closed by reference to the fixity of the past.

Admitting fluidity and mobility in the past, however does not deny violence and exploitation in that time, and I do not think that any reader would have reached this passage while retaining any illusions about a pre-modern golden age in either woods or fields. Neither would the reader, I think, have retained the idea that the weakness or absence of the state and the complete autonomy of local communities resulted in social harmony. But the past is past, and the dead must bury the dead: the claims of the living have to rest on their own entitlements, not on those of their supposed ancestors. Human rights and freedoms exist for the present generations, and cannot be extended to the lost denizens of the charnel-house of history – from Kosovo to Kashi, too many un-

fulfilled revenges lurk in that abode. The past is irredeemable, and the price of even the attempt to redeem it will be much blood.

However, the strategies of differentiation, dominance and exploitation that we have traced through history are far from impossible in the present, and their practitioners not slow to adopt modern shibboleths – including ethnicity and indigeneity – to cover novel exaction and renewed violence, whether in connivance with or defiance of the state. Any attempt to organise public life around claims to authentic indigeneity can only encourage these trends, with explosive consequences. Furthermore, no freedom is lost if we accept that rights exist solely in the present: cultural expressions, ethnic or national identities, have rights irrespective of the length of their genealogies, and need not strive to extend them by the invention of descent from ancient conquerors, or more ancient autochthones. The inhabitants of the Narmada valley have entitlements even if they have not inhabited it from palaeolithic times, and should have no need to assert that ancient presence in order to claim their rights. Nor indeed, is it desirable that entitlements be extended according to length of genealogy rather than equality of right. Societies that move down the former path are unlikely to ever evolve into successful political communities that safeguard the rights of all – they are far more likely to be sucked into the maelstrom of ethnic conflict whose victims flash daily across the television screens of a compassion-weary world.

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